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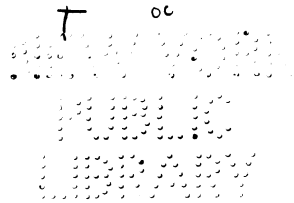
WHITE HEATHER.

WHITE HEATHER

A NOVEL

BY

WILLIAM BLACK



NEW AND REVISED EDITION

NEW YORK

HARPER & BROTHERS, FRANKLIN SQUARE

1893

THE NEW YORK
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LONDON:
PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED,
STAMFORD STREET AND CHARING CROSS.

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WHITE HEATHER.

CHAPTER I.

A JOURNEY NORTHWARD.

On a certain cold evening in January, and just as the Scotch night-mail was about to start for the north, a stranger drove up to Euston and alighted, and was glad enough to escape from the chill draughts of the echoing station into the glow and warmth and comfort of a sleeping-car. He was a man of means apparently; for one half of this carriage, containing four berths, and forming a room apart, as it were, had been reserved for himself alone; while his travelling impedimenta—fur-lined coats and hoods and rugs and what not—were of an elaborate and sumptuous description. On the other hand, there was nothing of ostentation about either his dress or appearance or demeanour. He was a tall, thin, quiet-looking man, with an aquiline nose, sallow complexion, and keen but not unkindly gray eyes. His short-cropped hair was grizzled, and there were deep lines in the worn and ascetic face; but this may have been the result of an exhausting climate rather than of any mental care, for there was certainly no touch of melancholy in his expression. His costume was somewhat prim and precise; there was a kind of schoolmasterish look about the stiff white collar and small black tie; his gloves were new and neat. For the rest, he seemed used to travelling; he began to make himself at home at once, and scarcely looked up from this setting of things to rights when the conductor made his appearance,

"Mr. Hodson, sir?" the latter said, with an inquiring glance.

"That's about what they call me," he answered slowly, as he opened a capacious dressing-bag covered with crocodile-hide.

"Do you expect any friends to join you farther along, sir?"

"Not that I know of," was the answer—and a pair of dark-blue velvet slippers, with initials worked in gold, were fished out and thrown upon the seat beside him.

But when the conductor had got one of the lower sleeping-berths made ready and the traveller had completed his leisurely arrangements for passing the night in comfort, a somewhat one-sided conversation ensued. This gaunt, slow-speaking, reserved man proved to be quite talkative—in a curious, measured, dry, and staccato fashion; and if his conversation consisted chiefly of questions, these showed that he had a very honest and simple concern in the welfare of this other human being whom chance had thrown in his way, and that he could express his friendly interest without any touch of patronage or condescension. He asked first about the railway-line; how the company's servants were paid; what were their hours on duty; whether they had formed any associations for relief in case of sickness; what this particular man got for his work; whether he could look forward to any bettering of his lot, and so forth. And then, fixing his eyes more scrutinisingly on his companion, he began to ask about his family affairs—where he lived; what children he had; how often he saw them; and the like; and these questions were so obviously prompted by no idle curiosity, but by an honest sympathy, and by the apparent desire of one human being to get to understand fully and clearly the position and surroundings and prospects of this other fellow-creature, that it was impossible for any one to take offence.

"And how old is your little girl?"

"Eight, sir: she will be nine in May next."

"What do you call her?"

"Caroline, sir."

"Why, you don't say!" he exclaimed, with his eyes—which were usually calm and observant—lighting up with

some surprise. "That is the name of my girl too—though I can't call her little any more. Well now," he added, as he took out his purse and selected a sovereign from the mass of coins, "I think this is about what you ought to do. When you get back to Camden Town, you start an account in the Post Office Savings Bank, in your little girl's name, and you put in this sovereign as a first deposit. Then, whenever you have an odd sixpence or shilling to give her —a birthday present, or that—you keep adding on and on; and there will be a nice little sum for her in after years. And if ever she asks, you can tell her it was the father of an American Caroline who made her this little present; and if she grows up to be as good a girl as the American Carry, she'll do very well, I think."

The conductor scarcely knew how to express his thanks, but the American cut him short, saying coolly—

"I don't give the sovereign to you at all. It is in trust for your daughter. And you don't look to me the kind of man who would go and drink it."

He took out an evening newspaper, and, at the hint, the conductor went away to get ready the berths in the other end of the car. When he came back again to see if the gentleman wanted anything further for the night, they had thundered along the line until they were nearing Rugby.

"Why, yes," Mr. Hodson said, in answer to the question, "you might get me a bottle of soda-water when we get to the station."

"I have soda-water in the car, sir."

"Bring me a bottle, then, please."

"And shall I get anything else for you, sir, at Rugby?"

"No, I thank you."

When the man returned with the soda-water, the traveller had taken from his dressing-bag a bottle labelled "Bromide of Potassium," and he was just about to mix his customary sleeping-draught when it occurred to him that perhaps this conductor could tell him something of the new and far country into which he was about to adventure for the first time. And in making these inquiries he showed that he was just as frank-spoken about his own plans and circumstances as he expected other people to be about theirs.

When the conductor confessed that he knew next to nothing about the north of Scotland, never having been farther than Perth, and even then his knowledge of the country being confined to the railway-line and the stations, Mr. Hodson went on to say—in that methodical way of his, with little rising inflexions here and there—

"Well, it's bound to be different from London, anyway. It can't be like London; and that's the main thing for me. Why, that London fog, never moving, same in the morning, same at night, it's just too dismal for anything; the inside of a jail is a fool to it. 'Pears to me that a London afternoon is just about as melancholy as they make it; if there's anything more melancholy than that anywhere, I don't know it. Well, now, it can't be like that at Cape Wrath."

"I should think not, sir."

"I daresay if I lived in the town, and had my club, and knew people, it might be different; and my daughter seems to get through the time well enough; but young folks are easily amused. Say, now, about this salmon-fishing in the north: you don't know when it begins?"

"No, sir."

"You haven't seen anybody going yet with a bundle of rods?"

"No, sir, not this year yet."

"Hope they haven't been playing it on me—I was told I could begin on the eleventh. But it don't signify much so long's I get out of that infernal cut-throat atmosphere of London."

At this point the train began to slow into Rugby station, and the conductor left to attend to his duties; and by the time they were moving out again and on their way to the far north, Mr. Hodson had mixed and drunk his nightly potion, and, partially undressed, was wrapped up in the thick and warm coverings of the sleeping-berth, where, whether owing to the bromide of potassium, or the jog-trot rattle of the wheels, he was soon plunged in a profound slumber.

Well, if part of his design in thus venturing upon a journey to the north in mid-winter was to get away from the monotonous mists of London, the next morning showed him that so far he had been abundantly successful. The

day breaking caused him to open his eyes; and instinctively he turned to the window. There before him was a strange, and unusual, and welcome sight. No more dismal grays, and the gathering down of a hopeless dusk; but the clear, glad light of the morning—a band of flashing gold all along the eastern horizon, behind the jet-black stems and branches of the leafless trees; and over that the heavens were all of a pale and luminous lilac, with clouds hanging here and there—clouds that were dark and almost thunderous in their purple look, but that really meant nothing but beauty, as they lay there soft and motionless in the glowing and mystical dawn. Quickly he got up. The windows were thrown open. And this air that rushed in—so fresh, so sweet, so full of all kinds of mellow and fragrant messages from the hills, and the pine-woods, and the wide-lying straths—did it not bring a strange kind of joy and surprise with it?

"A beautiful morning, sir; we are getting near to Perth now," the conductor said, when he made his appearance.

"Are we in time?"

"Yes, in very good time."

"And no hurry about breakfast?"

"No, sir; you don't start again till nine o'clock."

Even this big hollow station, with its wide stone platforms and resounding arch: was it the white light that filled it, or the fresh air that blew through it, that made it quite a cheerful place? He was charmed with the accent of the timid handmaiden who brought him his breakfast in the refreshment room, and who waited on him in such a friendly, half-anxious, shy fashion; and he wondered whether he would dare to offer so pretty and well-mannered a young lady anything over the customary charge in token of his gratitude to her for her gentle ways. Perth itself: well, there had been rain in the night, and the streets near the station were full of mud; but then the cart ruts in the mud were gleaming lines of gold; and the beautiful sky hung over the slowly rising smoke of the houses; and the air was everywhere so sweet and welcome. He had got into a new world altogether; the weight of the London atmosphere was lifted from him; he whistled "Auld Lang Syne"—which *was the* only Scotch air he knew—and the

lugubrious tune sounded quite pleasant on so joyous a morning.

Moreover, these were but first and commonplace experiences. For by and by, when he had again taken his seat to prosecute his journey—and he found himself the sole occupant of the carriage—the sunrise had widened into the full splendour of a sunlit day; and as the train sped away to the north, he, sitting at the window there, and having nothing to do but examine the new country he was entering, was wholly amazed at the intensity and brilliancy of the colouring around, and at the extraordinary vividness of the light. The wide stretches of the Tay shone like burnished silver; there were yellow straths and fields; and beech hedges of a rich russet-red; and fir-woods of a deep fresh green; and still farther away low-lying hills of a soft and ruddy purple, touched sharp here and there with patches of snow; and over all these a blue sky as of summer. The moist, warm air that blew in at the window seemed laden with pine odours; the country women at the small stations had a fresh pink colour in their cheeks; everywhere a new and glad and wholesome life seemed to be abroad, and cheerfulness, and rich hues, and sunlight.

"This is good enough," he said to himself. "This is something like what I shipped for."

And so they sped on: through the soft, wide-stretching woods of Murthly, and Birnam, and Dunkeld; through the shadow and sudden gleams of Killiecrankie Pass; on by Blair Athol and the banks of the Garry; until, with slow and labouring breath, the train began to force its way up the heights of the Grampians, in the lone neighbourhood of the Drumouchter Forest. The air was keener here; the patches of snow were nearer at hand; indeed, in some places the line had evidently been cleared, and large snow banks heaped up on each side. But by and by the motion of the train seemed to become easier; and soon it was apparent that the descent had begun; presently they were rattling away down into the wide and shining valley of Strathspey; and far over there on the west and north, and keeping guard over the plain, as it were, rose the giant masses of the Cairngorm Hills, the snow sparkling here and there on their shoulders and peaks.

It was not until half-past four in the afternoon that the long railway journey came to an end; and during that time he had come upon many a scene of historical interest and pictorial beauty. He had been within a short distance of the mournful "haughs of Cromdale;" he had crossed Culloden Moor. Nearing Forres, he had come within sight of the Northern Sea; and thereafter had skirted the blue ruffled waters of the Moray, and Cromarty, and Dornoch Firths. But even when he had got to Lairg, a little hamlet at the foot of Loch Shin, his travelling for the day was not nearly over; there still remained a drive of four-and-twenty miles; and although it was now dusk and the weather threatened a change, he preferred to push on that night. Travelling did not seem to tire him much; no doubt he was familiar with immeasurably greater distances in his own country. Moreover, he had learned that there was nothing particular to look at in the stretch of wild moorland that lay between him and his destination; and then again, if it was dark now, there would be moonlight later on. So he ate his dinner leisurely and in content, until a waggonette with two stout horses was brought round; then he got in; and presently they were away from the little hamlet and out in a strange land of darkness and silence, scarcely anything visible around them, the only sound the jog-trot clatter of the horses' feet.

It was a desperately lonely drive. The road appeared to go over interminable miles of flat or scarcely undulating moorland; and even when the moonlight began to make the darkness faintly visible, that only increased the sense of solitude, for there was not even a single tree to break the monotony of the sombre horizon line. It had begun to rain also: not actual rain, but a kind of thin drizzle, that seemed to mix itself up with the ineffectual moonlight, and throw a wan haze over these far-reaching and desolate wastes. Tramp, tramp went the horses' feet through this ghostly world; the wet mist grew thicker and thicker and clung around the traveller's hair; it was a chilling mist, moreover, and seemed to search for weak places about the throat. The only sharply defined objects that the eye could rest on were the heads and upthrown ears of the horses, that shone in the light sent forward by the lamps: all else was a form-

less wilderness of gloom, shadows following shadows, and ever the desolate landscape stretching on and on, and losing itself in the night.

The American stood up in the waggonette, perhaps to shake off for a second the clammy sensation of the wet.

"Say, young man," he observed—but in an absent kind of way, for he was regarding, as far as that was possible, the dusky undulations of the mournful landscape—"don't you think now, that for a good wholesome dose of God-forsakenness, this'll about take the cake?"

"Ah beg your paurdon, sir," said the driver, who was apparently a Lowlander.

The stranger, however, did not seem inclined to continue the conversation; he sank into his seat again; gathered his rugs round him; and contented himself as heretofore by idly watching the lamplight touching here and there on the harness and lighting up the horses' heads and ears.

Mile after mile, hour after hour, went by in this monotonous fashion; and to the stranger it seemed as if he were piercing farther and farther into some unknown land unpeopled by any human creatures. Not a ray of light from any hut or farmhouse was visible anywhere. But as the time went on, there was at least some little improvement in the weather. Either the moonlight was growing stronger, or the thin drizzle clearing off; at all events he could now make out ahead of him—and beyond the flat moorland—the dusky masses of some mountains, with one great peak overtopping them all. He asked the name.

"That is Ben Clebrig, sir."

And then through the mist and the moonlight a dull sheet of silver began to disclose itself dimly.

"Is that a lake down there?"

"Loch Naver, sir."

"Then we are not far from Inver-Mudal?"

"No far noo; just a mile or two, sir," was the consoling answer.

And indeed when he got to the end of his journey, and reached the little hostelry set far amid these moorland and mountain wilds, his welcome there made ample amends. He was ushered into a plain, substantially furnished, and

spacious sitting-room, brightly lit up by the lamp that stood on the white cloth of the table, and also by the blazing glare from the peats in the mighty fireplace; and when his eyes had got accustomed to this bewilderment of warmth and light, he found, awaiting his orders, and standing shyly at the door, a pretty, tall, fair-haired girl, who, with the softest accent in the world, asked him what she should bring him for supper. And when he said he did not care to have anything, she seemed quite surprised and even concerned. It was a long, long drive, she said, in her shy and pretty way; and would not the gentleman have some hare-soup —that they had kept hot for him? and so forth. But her coaxing was of no avail.

"By the way, what is your name, my girl?" he said.

"Nelly, sir."

"Well, then, Nelly, do you happen to know whether Lord Ailine's keeper is anywhere in the neighbourhood?"

"He is in the unn, sir, waiting for you."

"Oh, indeed. Well, tell him I should like to see him. And say, what is his name?"

"Ronald, sir."

"Ronald?"

"That is his first name," she explained.

"His 'first name'? I thought that was one of our Americanisms."

She did not seem to understand this.

"Ronald Strang is his name, sir; but we jist call him Ronald."

"Very well, Nelly; you go and tell him I want to see him."

"Ferry well, sir," she said; and away she went.

But little indeed did this indefatigable student of nature and human nature—who had been but half interested by his observations and experiences through that long day's travel —know what was yet in store for him. The door opened; a slim-built and yet muscular young man of eight-and-twenty or so appeared there, clad in a smart deer-stalking costume of brownish green; he held his cap in his hand; and round his shoulder was the strap from which hung behind the brown leather case of his telescope. This Mr. Hodson saw at a glance; and also *something* more. He prided himself on

his judgment of character. And when his quick look had taken in the keen, sun-tanned face of this young fellow, the square, intellectual forehead, the firm eyebrows, the finely cut and intelligent mouth, and a certain proud set of the head, he said to himself, "This is *a man*: there's something here worth knowing."

"Good evening, sir," the keeper said, to break the momentary silence.

"Good evening," said Mr. Hodson (who had been rather startled out of his manners). "Come and sit down by the fire; and let's have a talk now about the shooting and the salmon-fishing. I have brought the letters from the Duke's agent with me."

"Yes, sir," said Strang; and he moved a bit farther into the room; but remained standing, cap in hand.

"Pull in a chair," said Mr. Hodson, who was searching for the letters.

"Thank ye, sir; thank ye," said the keeper; but he remained standing nevertheless.

Mr. Hodson returned to the table.

"Sit down, man, sit down," said he, and he himself pulled in a chair. "I don't know what your customs are over here, but anyhow I'm an American citizen; I'm not a lord."

Somewhat reluctantly the keeper obeyed this injunction, and for a minute or two seemed to be rather uncomfortable; but when he began to answer the questions concisely put to him with regard to the business before them, his shyness wholly wore away, for he was the master of this subject, not the stranger who was seeking for information. Into the details of these matters it is needless to enter here; and, indeed, so struck was the American with the talk and bearing of this new acquaintance that the conversation went far afield. And the farther afield it went, the more and more was he impressed with the extraordinary information and intelligence of the man, the independence of his views, the shrewdness and sometimes sarcasm of his judgments. Always he was very respectful; but in his eyes—which seemed singularly dark and lustrous here indoors, but which, out of doors and when he was after the wary stag, or the still more wary hinds, on the far

slopes of Clebrig, contracted and became of a keen brownish gray—there was a kind of veiled fire of humour which, as the stranger guessed, might in other circumstances blaze forth wildly enough. Mr. Hodson, of Chicago, was entirely puzzled. A gamekeeper? He had thought (from his reading of English books) that a gamekeeper was a velveteen-coated person whose ideas ranged from the ale-house to the pheasant coverts, and thence and quickly back again. But this man seemed to have a wide and competent knowledge of public affairs; and, when it came to a matter of argument (they had a keen little squabble about the protection tariffs of America) he could reason hard, and was not over-compliant.

"God bless me," Mr. Hodson was driven to exclaim at last, "what is a man of your ability doing in a place like this? Why don't you go away to one of the big cities—or over to America—where a young fellow with his wits about him can push himself forward?"

"I would rather be 'where the dun deer lie,'" said he, with a kind of bashful laugh.

"You read Kingsley?" the other said, still more astonished.

"My brother lends me his books from time to time," Ronald said modestly. "He's a Free Church minister in Glasgow."

"A Free Church minister? He went through college, then?"

"Yes, sir; he took his degree at Aberdeen."

"But—but—" said the newcomer, who had come upon a state of affairs he could not understand at all—"who was your father, then? He sent your brother to college, I presume?"

"Oh no, sir. My father is a small farmer down the Lammermuir way; and he just gave my brother Andrew his wages like the rest, and Andrew saved up for the classes."

"You are not a Highlander, then?"

"But half-and-half, like my name, sir," he said (and all the shyness was gone now: he spoke to this stranger frankly and simply as he would have spoken to a shepherd on the hillside). "My mother was Highland. She was a Macdonald; and so she would have me called Ronald; it's a common *name* wi' them.'

Mr. Hodson stared at him for a second or two in silence.

"Well," said he, slowly, "I don't know. Different men have different ways of looking at things. I think if I were of your age, and had your intelligence, I would try for something better than being a gamekeeper."

"I am very well content, sir," said the other placidly; "and I couldna be more than that anywhere else. It's a healthy life; and a healthy life is the best of anything—at least that is my way of thinking. I wadna like to try the toun; I doubt it wouldn't agree wi' me." And then he rose to his feet. "I beg your pardon, sir; I've been keeping ye late."

Well, Mr. Hodson was nothing loth to let him go; for although he had arrived at the conviction that here was a valuable human life, of exceptional quality and distinction, being absolutely thrown away and wasted, still he had not formed the arguments by which he might try to save it for the general good, and for the particular good of the young man himself. He wanted time to think over this matter—and in cold blood; for there is no doubt that he had been surprised and fascinated by the intellectual boldness and incisiveness of the younger man's opinions and by the chance sarcasms that had escaped him.

"I could get him a good opening in Chicago soon enough," he was thinking to himself, when the keeper had left, "but upon my soul I don't know the man who is fit to become that man's master. Why, I'd start a newspaper for him myself, and make him editor—and if he can't write, he has got mother-wit enough to guide them who can—but he and I would be quarrelling in a week. That fellow is not to be driven by anybody."

He now rang the bell for a candle; and the slim and yellow-haired Nelly showed him upstairs to his room, which he found to be comfortably warm, for there was a blazing peat fire in the grate, scenting all the air with its delicious odour. He bade her good-night, and turned to open his dressing-bag; but at the same moment he heard voices without, and being of an inquiring turn of mind, he went to the window. The first thing he saw was that outside a beautiful clear moon was now shining; the leafless elm-

trees and the heavy-foliaged pines throwing sharp black shadows across the white road. And this laughing and jesting at the door of the inn?—surely he heard Ronald's voice there—the gayest of any—among the jibes that seemed to form their farewells for the night? Then there was the shutting of a door; and in the silence that ensued he saw the solitary, straight-limbed, clean-made figure of a man stride up the white road, a little dog trotting behind him.

"Come along, Harry, my lad," the man said to his small companion—and that, sure enough, was the keeper's voice.

And then, in the stillness of the moonlight night, this watcher and listener was startled to hear a clear and powerful tenor voice suddenly begin to sing—in a careless fashion, it is true, as if it were but to cheer the homeward going—

"*Come all ye jolly shepherds,*
That whistle through the glen,
I'll tell ye of a secret
That courtiers dinna ken.
What is the greatest bliss
That the tongue o' man can name?—
'Tis to woo a bonnie lassie
When the kye come hame."

"Great heavens!" said Mr. Hodson to himself, "such a voice—and all Europe waiting for a new tenor! But at seven or eight and twenty I suppose he is beyond training."

The refrain became more and more distant:

"*When the kye come hame,*
When the kye come hame,
'Twixt the gloamin' and the mirk,
When the kye come hame."

Both the keeper and the little trotting terrier had disappeared now, having turned a corner of the road where there was a clump of trees. The traveller who had wandered into these remote wilds sate down for a minute or two to sum up his investigations of the evening, and they were these:

"Accounts of the deer seem shaky; but there may have been bad shooting *this* last year, as he says. The salmon-

fishing sounds more likely; and then Carry could come with us in the boat—which would make it less dull for her. Anyhow, I have discovered the most remarkable man I have met with as yet in the old country; and to think of his being thrown away like that!"

CHAPTER II.

MEENIE.

We may now follow Ronald Strang as he walks along to his cottage, which, with its kennels and its shed for hanging up the slain deer, stands on a little plateau by the roadside, a short distance from the inn. The moonlight night is white and beautiful, but far from silent; for the golden plover are whistling and calling down by the lochside, and the snipe are sending their curious harsh note across the moorland wastes. Moreover, he himself seems to be in a gay mood (perhaps glad to be over the embarrassment of a first meeting with the stranger), and he is conversing amicably with his little terrier. The subject is rats. Whether the wise little Harry knows all that is said need not be determined: but he looks up from time to time and wags his stump of a tail as he trots placidly along. And so they get up to the cottage and enter, for the outer door is on the latch, thieves being unheard of in this remote neighbourhood; though here Harry hesitates, for he is uncertain whether he is to be invited into the parlour or not. But the next moment all consideration of this four-footed friend is driven out of his master's head. Ronald had expected to find the parlour empty, and his little sister, at present his sole housekeeper, retired to rest. But the moment he opens the door, he finds that not only is she there, sitting by the table near to the solitary lamp, but that she has a companion with her. And well he knows who that must be.

"Dear me, Miss Douglas," he exclaimed, "have I kept you so late!"

The young lady, who now rose, with something of a flush over her features—for she had been startled by his sudden entrance—was certainly an extraordinarily pretty

creature: not so much handsome, or distinguished, or striking, as altogether pretty and winning and gentle-looking. She was obviously of a pure Highland type: the figure slender and graceful, the head small and beautifully formed; the forehead rather square for a woman, but getting its proper curve from the soft and pretty hair; the features refined and intelligent; the mouth sensitive; the expression a curious sort of seeking to please, as it were, and ready to form itself into an abundant gratitude for the smallest act of kindness. Of course, much of this look was owing to her eyes, which were the true Highland eyes; of a blue gray these were, with somewhat dark lashes; wide apart, and shy, and apprehensive, they reminded one of the startled eyes of some wild animal; but they were entirely human in their quick sympathy, in their gentleness, in their appeal to all the world, as it were, for a favouring word. As for her voice—well, if she used but few of the ordinary Highland phrases, she had undoubtedly a considerable trace of Highland accent; for, although her father was an Edinburgh man, her mother (as the elderly lady very soon let her neighbours know) was one of the Stuarts of Glengask and Orosay; and then again Meenie had lived nearly all her life in the Highlands, her father never having risen above the position of a parish doctor, and welcoming even such local removals as served to improve his position in however slight a way.

"Maggie," said Miss Douglas (and the beautiful wide-apart eyes were full of a shy apology), "was feeling a little lonely, and I did not like to leave her."

"But if I had known," said he, "I would not have stayed so late. The gentleman that is come about the shooting is a curious man; it's no the salmon and the grouse and the deer he wants to know about only; it's everything in the country. Now, Maggie, lass, get ye to bed. And I will see you down the road, Miss Douglas."

"Indeed there is no need for that," said Meenie, with downcast eyes.

"Would ye have a bogle run away with ye?" he said good-naturedly.

And so she bade good-night to the little Maggie, and took up some books and drawings she had brought to

beguile the time withal; and then she went out into the clear night, followed by the young gamekeeper.

And what a night it was—or rather, might have been—for two lovers! The wide waters of the loch lay still and smooth, with a broad pathway of silver stretching away into the dusk of the eastern hills; not a breath of wind stirred bush or tree; and if Ben Clebrig in the south was mostly a bulk of shadow, far away before them in the northern skies rose the great shoulders of Ben Loyal, pallid in the moonlight, the patches of snow showing white up near the stars. They had left behind them the little hamlet—which merely consisted of a few cottages and the inn; they were alone in this pale silent world. And down there, beneath the little bridge, ran the placid Mudal Water: and if they had a Bible with them?—and would stand each on one side of the stream?—and clasp hands across? It was a night for lovers' vows.

"Maggie is getting on well with her lessons," the pretty young lady said, in that gentle voice of hers. "She is very diligent."

"I'm sure I'm much obliged to ye, Miss Douglas," was the respectful answer, "for the trouble ye take with her. It's an awkward thing to be sae far from a school. I'm thinking I'll have to send her to my brother in Glasgow, and get her put to school there."

"Oh, indeed, indeed," said she, "that will be a change now. And who will look after the cottage for you, Ronald?"

She addressed him thus quite naturally, and without shyness; for no one ever dreamed of calling him anything else.

"Well, I suppose Mrs. MacGregor will give the place a redd* up from time to time. But a keeper has but half learned his business that canna shift for himself; there's some of the up-country lodges with ne'er a woman-body within a dozen miles o' them."

"It is your brother the minister that Maggie will be going to?" she said.

"Oh yes; he is married, and has a family of his own; she will be comfortable there."

* "Redd," a setting to rights.

"Well, it is strange," said she, "that you should have a brother in Glasgow, and I a sister, and that your mother should be Highland and mine too."

But this was putting himself and her on much too common a footing; and he was always on his guard against that, however far her gentleness and good-nature might lead her.

"When is your father coming back, Miss Douglas?" said he.

"Well, I really do not know," she said. "I do not think he has ever had so wide a district to attend to, and we are never sure of his being at home."

"It must be very lonely for a young lady brought up like you," he ventured to say, "that ye should have no companions. And for your mother, too; I wonder she can stand it."

"Oh no," she said, "for the people are so friendly with us. And I do not know of any place that I like better."

By this time they were come to the little wooden gate of the garden, and he opened that for her. Before them was the cottage, with its windows, despite the moonlight on the panes, showing the neat red blinds within. She gave him her hand for a second.

"Good-night, Ronald," said she pleasantly.

"Good-night, Miss Douglas," said he; "Maggie must not keep you up so late again."

And therewith he walked away back again along the white road, and only now perceived that by some accident his faithful companion Harry had been shut in when they left. He also discovered, when he got home, that his sister Maggie had been so intent puzzling over some arithmetical mysteries which Meenie had been explaining to her, that she had still further delayed her going to bed.

"What, what?" said he, good-humouredly. "Not in bed yet, lass?"

The little red-headed, freckled-faced lassie obediently gathered up her belongings, but at the door she lingered for a moment.

"Ronald," said she, timidly, "why do ye call Meenie 'Miss Douglas?' It's *not* friendly."

"When ye're a bit older, lass, ye'll understand," he said, with a laugh.

Little Maggie was distressed in a vague way, for she had formed a warm affection for Meenie Douglas, and it seemed hard and strange that her own brother should show himself so distant in manner.

"Do you think she's proud? for she's not that," the little girl made bold to say.

"Have ye never heard o' the Stuarts of Glengask?" said he; and he added grimly, "My certes, if ye were two or three years older, I'm thinking Mrs. Douglas would have told ye ere now how Sir Alexander used to call on them in Edinburgh every time he came north. Most folk have heard that story. But however, when Meenie, as ye like to call her, goes to live in Edinburgh or Glasgow, or some o' the big towns, of course she'll be Miss Douglas to every one, as she ought to be here, only that she's taken a fancy to you, and, my lass, fairly spoils ye with her kindness. Now, off with ye, and dinna fash your head about what I or any one else calls her; if she's content to be Meenie to you, ye should be proud enough."

As soon as she was gone he stirred up the peats, lit his pipe, and drew in a chair to the small table near the fire. It was his first pipe that evening, and he wished to have it in comfort. And then, to pass the time, he unlocked and opened a drawer in the table, and began to rummage through the papers collected there—all kinds of shreds and fragments they were, scored over mostly in pencil, and many of them bearing marks as if the writing had been done outside in the rain.

The fact was, that in idle times, when there was no trapping to be done, or shooting of hoodie-crows, or breaking-in of young dogs, he would while away many an hour on the hillside or along the shores of the loch by stringing verses together. They were done for amusement's sake. Sometimes he jotted them down, sometimes he did not. If occasionally, when he had to write a letter to a friend of his at Tongue, or make some request of his brother in Glasgow, he put these epistles into jingling rhyme, that was about all the publication his poetical efforts ever achieved; and he was most particular to conceal from the "gentry"

who came down to the shooting any knowledge that he scribbled at all. He knew it would be against him. He had no wish to figure as one of those local poets (and alas! they have been and are too numerous in Scotland) who, finding within them some small portion of the afflatus of a Burns, or a Motherwell, or a Tannahill, are seduced away from their lawful employment, gain a fleeting popularity in their native village, perhaps attain to the dignity of a notice in a Glasgow or Edinburgh newspaper, and subsequently and almost inevitably die of drink, in the most abject misery of disappointment. No; if he had any ambition it was not in that direction; it was rather that he should be known as the smartest deerstalker and the best trainer of dogs in Sutherlandshire. He knew where his strength lay, and where he found content. And then there was another reason why he could not court newspaper applause with these idle rhymes of his. They were nearly all about Meenie Douglas. Meenie-olatry was written all across those scribbled sheets. And of course that was a dark secret known only to himself; and indeed it amused him, as he turned over the loose leaves, to think that all the Stuarts of Glengask and Orosay (and that most severe and terrible of them all, Mrs. Douglas) could not in the least prevent his saying to Meenie just whatever he pleased—within the wooden confines of this drawer. And what had he not said? Sometimes it was but a bit of careless singing—

Roses white, roses red,
Roses in the lane,
Tell me, roses red and white,
Where is Meenie gane?

O is she on Loch Loyal's side?
Or up by Mudal Water?
In vain the wild doves in the woods
Everywhere have sought her.

Roses white, roses red,
Roses in the lane,
Tell me, roses red and white,
Where is Meenie gane?

Well, now, supposing you are far away up on Ben Clebrig's slopes, a gun over your shoulder, and idly looking

out for a white hare or a ptarmigan, if you take to humming these careless rhymes to some such tune as "Cherry Ripe," who is to hinder? The strongest of all the south winds cannot carry the tidings to Glengask nor yet to Orosay's shores. And so the whole country-side—every hill and stream and wood and rock—came to be associated with Meenie, and saturated with the praise and glory of her. Why, he made the very mountains fight about her!

Ben Loyal spake to Ben Clebrig,
And they thundered their note of war:
"You look down on your sheep and your sheepfolds;
I see the ocean afar.

"You look down on the huts and the hamlets,
And the trivial tasks of men;
I see the great ships sailing
Along the northern main."

Ben Clebrig laughed, and the laughter
Shook heaven and earth and sea:
"There is something in that small hamlet
That is fair enough for me—

"Ay, fairer than all your sailing ships
Struck with the morning flame:
A fresh young flower from the hand of God—
Rose Meenie is her name!"

But at this moment, as he turned over this mass of scraps and fragments, there was one, much more audacious than the rest, that he was in search of, and when he found it a whimsical fancy got into his head. If he were to make out a fair copy of the roughly scrawled lines, and fold that up, and address it to Meenie, just to see how it looked? He took out his blotting-pad, and selected the best sheet of note-paper he could find; and then he wrote (with a touch of amusement, and perhaps of something else, too, in his mind the while) thus—

O wilt thou be my dear love?
(Meenie and Meenie),
O wilt thou be my ain love?
(My sweet Meenie).
Were you wi' me upon the hill,
It's I would gar the dogs be still,
We'd lie our lane and kiss our fill,
(My love Meenie).

Aboon the burn a wild bush grows
(Meenie and Meenie),
And on the bush there blooms a rose
(My sweet Meenie);
And wad ye tak the rose frae me,
And wear it where it fain would be,
It's to your arms that I would flee,
(Rose-sweet Meenie!)

He carefully folded the paper and addressed it outside —so:

Miss Wilhelmina Stuart Douglas,
Care of James Douglas, Esq., M.D.,
Inver-Mudal,
Sutherlandshire.

And then he held it out at arm's length, and regarded it, and laughed, in a contemptuous kind of way, at his own folly.

"Well," he was thinking to himself, "if it were not for Stuart of Glengask, I suppose the day might come when I could send her a letter like that; but as it is, if they were to hear of any such madness, Glengask and all his kith and kin would be for setting the heather on fire."

He tossed the letter back on the blotting-pad, and rose and went and stood opposite the blazing peats. This movement aroused the attention of the little terrier, who immediately jumped up from his snooze and began to whimper his expectation. Strang's heart smote him.

"God bless us!" he said aloud. "When a lass gets into a man's head, there's room for nothing else; he'll forget his best friends. Here, Harry, come along, and I'll get ye your supper, my man."

He folded up the blotting-pad and locked it in the drawer, blew out the candles, called Harry to follow him into the kitchen, where the small terrier was duly provided for and left on guard. Then he sought out his own small room. He was whistling as he went; and, if he dreamt of anything that night, be sure it was not of the might and majesty of Sir Alexander Stuart of Glengask and Orosay. These verses to Meenie were but playthings and fancies—for idle hours.

CHAPTER III.

ON THE LOCH.

A CONSIDERABLE wind arose during the night; Mr. Hodson did not sleep very well; and, lying awake towards morning, he came to the conclusion that he had been befooled, or rather that he had befooled himself, with regard to that prodigy of a gamekeeper. He argued with himself that his mental faculties must have been dulled by the long day's travel; he had come into the inn jaded and tired; and then finding himself face to face with an ordinarily alert and intrepid intellect, he had no doubt exaggerated the young man's abilities, and made a wonder of him where no wonder was needed. That he was a person of considerable information and showed common sense was likely enough. Mr. Hodson, in his studies of men and things, had heard something of the intelligence and education to be found among the working classes in Scotland. He had heard of the handloom weavers who were learned botanists; of the stone-masons who were great geologists; of the village poets who, if most of their efforts were but imitations of Ferguson and Burns and Tannahill, would here and there, in some chance moment of inspiration, sing out some true and pathetic song, to be taken to the hearts of their countrymen, and added to a treasure-store of rustic minstrelsy such as no other nation in the world has ever produced. At the same time he was rather anxious to meet Strang again, the better to get the measure of him. And as he was also curious to see what this neighbourhood into which he had penetrated looked like, he rose betimes in the morning—indeed, before the day was fully declared.

The wind still moaned about the house, but outside there was no sign of any storm; on the contrary, everything was strangely calm. The lake lay a dark lurid purple in the hollow of the encircling hills; and these, along the eastern heavens, were of the deepest and softest olive green; just over them was a line of gleaming salmon-red, keen and resplendent as if molten from a furnace; and over that again soft saffron-dusky clouds, deepening in tone the higher they hung in the clear pale steel hues of the

overhead sky. There was no sign of life anywhere—nothing but the birch woods sloping down to the shore; the moorland wastes of the lower hills; and above these the giant bulk and solemn shadows of Ben Clebrig,* dark against the dawn. It was a lovely sight; he began to think he had never before in his life felt himself so much alone. But whence came the sound of the wind that seemed to go moaning down the strath towards the purple lake?

Well, he made no doubt that it was up towards the north and west that the storm was brewing; and he remembered that a window in the sitting-room below looked in that direction; there he would be able to ascertain whether any fishing was practicable. He finished his dressing and went down. The breakfast table was laid; a mighty mass of peats was blazing cheerfully in the spacious fireplace. And the storm? Why, all the wide strath on this northern side of the house was one glow of yellow light in the now spreading sunrise; and still farther away in the north the great shoulders of Ben Loyal † had caught a faint roseate tinge; and the same pale and beautiful colour seemed to transfuse a large and fleecy cloud that clung around the snow-scarred peak. So he came to the conclusion that in this corner of the glen the wind said more than it meant; and that they might adventure on the loch without risk of being swamped or blown ashore.

The slim tall Highland lass made her appearance with further plenishings for the table, and "Good moarning!" she said, in her pretty way, in answer to his greeting.

"Say, now, has that man come down from Tongue yet?"

"No, sir," said Nelly, "he wass no come down yet." And then she looked up with a demure smile. "They would be keeping the New Year at Tongue last night."

"Keeping the New Year on the 14th of January?"

"It's the twelfth is the usual day, sir," she explained, "but that was Saturday, and they do not like a Saturday night, for they have to stop at twelve o'clock, and so most of them were for keeping it last night."

* That is, the Hill of the Playing Trout.

† More properly Ben Laoghal, the Hill of the Calves.

"Oh, indeed. Then the festive gentleman won't show up to-day?"

"But it is of no matter whateffer whether he comes or no; for I am sure that Ronald will be willing to lend a hand. Oh, I am sure of it. I will ask him myself."

"*You* will ask him?" was Mr. Hodson's internal soliloquy. "It is to *you* he will grant the favour. Indeed!"

He fixed his eyes on her.

"He is a good-looking young fellow, that Ronald."

She did not answer that; she was putting the marmalade, and the honey, and the cream on the table.

"He is not married?"

"No, sir."

"Well, now, when he thinks about getting married, I suppose he'll pretty well have his choice about here?"

"Indeed there iss others besides him," said Nelly rather proudly, but her face was red as she opened the door.

Well, whether it was owing to the intervention of Nelly or not, as soon as Mr. Hodson was ready to start he found Ronald waiting for him without; and not only that, but he had already assumed command of the expedition, having sent the one gillie who had arrived down to bale the boat. And then he would overhaul Mr. Hodson's fishing-gear—examining the rods, testing the lines and traces, and rejecting all the spoon baits, angels, sand-eels, and what not, that had been supplied by the London tackle-maker, for two or three of the familiar phantom minnows. Mr. Hodson could scarcely believe that this was the same man who last night had been discussing the disestablishment of state churches and the policy of protecting native industries. He had not a word for anything but the business before him; and the bold fashion in which he handled those minnows, all bristling with hooks, or drew the catgut traces through his fingers (Mr. Hodson shivered, and seemed to feel his own fingers being cut to the bone), showed that he was as familiar with the loch as with the hillside or the kennel.

"I'm not much on salmon-fishing myself," the American remarked modestly.

"It's rather early in the season, sir, I'm afraid," was the answer. "But we might get a fish after all; and if

we do it'll be the first caught in Scotland this year, I warrant."

They set out and walked down to the shore of the loch, and there Mr. Hodson seated himself on the gunwale of the flat-bottomed coble, and watched the two men putting the rods together and fixing the traces. The day had now declared itself; wild and stormy in appearance, but fair on the whole; great floods of sunshine falling suddenly on the yellow slopes and the russet birch woods; and shadows coming as rapidly across the far heights of Clebrig, steeping the mountains in gloom. As for the gillie who had been proof against the seductions of keeping the New Year, and who was now down on one knee, biting catgut with his teeth, he was a man as tall and as sallow as Mr. Hodson himself, but with an added expression of intense melancholy and hopelessness. Or was that but temporary?

"Duncan doesna like that boat," Ronald said, glancing at Mr. Hodson.

The melancholy man did not speak, but shook his head gloomily.

"Why?"

As the gillie did not answer, Ronald said—

"He thinks there is no luck with that boat."

"That boat?" the gillie said, with an angry look towards the hapless coble. "She has the worst luck of any boat in Sutherland—*tam her!*" he added, under his breath.

"In my country," the American said, in his slow way, "we don't mind luck much; we find perseverance about as good a horse to win with in the end."

He was soon to have his perseverance tried. Everything being ready they pushed off from the shore, Ronald taking stroke oar, the gillie at the bow; Mr. Hodson left to pay out the lines of the two rods, and fix these in the stern, when about five-and-thirty yards had gone forth. At first, it is true, he waited and watched with a trifle of anxiety. He wanted to catch a salmon; it would be something to write about to his daughter; it would be a new experience for himself. But when time passed and the boat was slowly rowed along the loch at a measured distance from the shore, without any touch of anything coming to make the point of either rod tremble, he rather gave up his hope in that

direction, and took to talking with Ronald. After all, it was not salmon-fishing alone that had brought him into these wilds.

"I suppose it is really too early in the season," he observed, without much chagrin.

"Raythér," said Ronald.

"Rawther," said the melancholy gillie.

But at that instant something happened that startled every one of them out of their apathy. The top of one of the rods was violently pulled at, and then there was a long shrill yell of the reel.

"There he is, sir! there he is, sir!" Ronald called.

Mr. Hodson made a grab blindly—for he had been looking at the scenery around—at one of the rods. It was the wrong one. But before he knew where he was, Ronald had got hold of the other and raised the top so as to keep a strain on the fish. The exchange of the rods was effected in a moment. Then when Ronald had wound in the other line and put the rod at the bow, he took to his oar again, leaving Mr. Hodson to fight his unknown enemy as best he might, but giving him a few words of direction from time to time, quietly, as if it were all a matter of course.

"Reel in, sir, reel in—keep an even strain on him—let him go—let him go if he wants——"

Well, the fish was not a fierce fighter; after the first long rush he scarcely did anything; he kept boring downwards, with a dull, heavy weight. It seemed easy work; and Mr. Hodson—triumphant in the hope of catching his first salmon—was tempted to call aloud to the melancholy gillie—

"Well, Duncan, how about luck now?"

"I think it's a kelt," the man answered morosely.

But the sinister meaning of this reply was not understood.

"I don't know what you call him," said Mr. Hodson, holding on with both hands to the long, lithe grilse-rod that was bent almost double. "Celt or Saxon, I don't know; but I seem to have got a good grip of him."

Then he heard Ronald say, in an undertone, to the gillie—

"A kelt? No fears. The first rush was too heavy for that."

And the gillie responded sullenly—

"He's following the boat like a cow."

"What is a kelt, anyway?" the American called out. "Something that swims, I suppose? It ain't a man?"

"I hope it's no a kelt, sir," said Ronald—but doubtfully.

"But what is a kelt, then, when he's at home?"

"A salmon, sir, that hasna been down to the sea; we'll have to put him back if he is."

Whirr! went the reel again; the fish, kelt or clean salmon, had struck deep down. But the melancholy creature at the bow was taking no further interest in the fight. He was sure it was a kelt. Most likely the minnow would be destroyed. Maybe he would break the trace. But a kelt it was. He knew the luck of this "tammed" boat.

The struggle was a tedious one. The beast kept boring down with the mere force of its weight, but following the coble steadily; and even Ronald, who had been combating his own doubts, at length gave in: he was afraid it was a kelt. Presently the last suspicion of hope was banished. With a tight strain on him, the now exhausted animal began to show near the surface of the water—his long eel-like shape and black back revealing too obviously what manner of creature he was. But this revelation had no effect on the amateur fisherman, who at last beheld the enemy he had been fighting with so long. He grew quite excited. A kelt?—he was a beautiful fine fish! If he could not be eaten he could be stuffed! Twenty pounds he was, if an ounce!—would he throw back such a trophy into the loch?

Ronald was crouching in the stern of the boat, the big landing-net in his hand, watching the slow circling of the kelt as it was being hauled nearer and nearer. His sentiments were of a different kind.

"Ah, you ugly brute!—ah, you rascal!—ah—ah!"—and then there was a deep scoop of the landing-net; and the next minute the huge eel-like beast was in the bottom of the boat, Duncan holding on to its tail, and Ronald gripping it by the gills, while he set to work to get the minnow out

of its jaws. And then without further ado—and without stopping to discuss the question of stuffing—the creature was heaved into the water again, with a parting benediction of "Bah, you brute!" It took its leave rapidly.

"Well, it's a pity, sir," Ronald said; "that would have been a twenty-four pound salmon if he had been down to the sea."

"It's the luck of this tammed boat," Duncan said gloomily.

But Mr. Hodson could not confess to any such keen sense of disappointment. He had never played so big a fish before, and was rather proud that so slight a grilse-rod and so slender a line should (of course, with some discretion and careful nursing on his part) have overmastered so big a beast. Then he did not eat salmon; there was no loss in that direction. And as he had not injured the kelt in any way, he reflected that he had enjoyed half-an-hour's excitement without doing harm to anything or anybody, and he was well content. So he paid out the two lines again, and set the rods, and began to renew his talk with Ronald touching the customs connected with the keeping of the New Year.

After all, it was a picturesque kind of occupation, kelts or no kelts. Look at the scene around them—the lapping waters of the loch, a vivid and brilliant blue when the skies were shining fair, or black and stormy again when the clouds were heavy in the heavens; and always the permanent features of the landscape—the soft yellows of the lower straths, where the withered grass was mixed with the orange bracken; the soft russet of the leafless birch woods fringing the shores of the lake; the deep violet shadows of Ben Clebrig stretching up into the long swathes of mist; and then the far amphitheatre of hills—Ben Hee, and Ben Hope, and Ben Loyal—with sunlight and shade intermingling their ethereal tints, but leaving the snow-streaks always sparkling and clear. He got used to the monotony of the slow circling of the upper waters of the lake. He forgot to watch the points of the rods. He was asking all kinds of questions about the stags and the hinds, about ptarmigan, and white hares, and roe, about the price of sheep, the rents of crofts, the comparative wages of gillies, and shepherds, and foresters, and keepers, and stalkers, and

the habits and customs of land-agents and factors. And at length, when it came to lunch-time, and when they landed, and found for him a sheltered place under the lee of a big rock, and when Ronald pointed out to him a grassy bank, and said rather ruefully—

"I dinna like to see that place empty, sir. That's where the gentlemen have the salmon laid out, that they may look at them at lunch-time—"

Mr. Hodson, as he opened the little basket that had been provided for him, answered cheerfully enough—

"My good friend, don't you imagine that I feel like giving it up yet. I'm not finished with this lake, and I'll back perseverance against luck any day. Seems to me we've done very well so far; I'm con-tent."

By and by they went back into the coble again, and resumed their patient pursuit; and there is little doubt that by this time Ronald had come to the conclusion that this stranger who had come amongst them was a singularly odd and whimsical person. It was remarkable enough that he should have undertaken this long and solitary journey in order to fish for salmon, and then show himself quite indifferent as to whether he got any or not; and it was scarcely human for any one to betray no disappointment whatever when the first fish caught proved to be a kelt; but it was still stranger that a man rich enough to talk about renting a deer-forest should busy himself with the petty affairs of the very poorest people around. Why, he wanted to know how much Nelly the housemaid could possibly save on her year's wages; whether she was supposed to lay by something as against her wedding-day; or whether any of the lads about would marry her for her pretty face alone. And when he discovered that Mr. Murray, the innkeeper, was about to give a New Year supper and dance to the lads and lasses of the neighbourhood, he made no scruple about hinting plainly that he would be glad of an invitation to join that festive party.

"Not if I'm going to be anything of a wet blanket," he said candidly. "My dancing days are over, and I'm not much in the way of singing; but I'll tell them an American story; or I'll present them with a barrel of whisky—if that will keep the fun going."

"I'm sure they'll be very glad, sir," Ronald said, "if ye just come and look on. When there's gentlemen at the Lodge, they generally come down to hear the pipes, and the young gentlemen have a dance too."

"What night did you say?"

"Monday next, sir."

Well, he had only intended remaining here for a day or two, to see what the place was like; but this temptation was too great. Here was a famous opportunity for the pursuit of his favourite study—the study of life and manners. This, had Ronald but known it, was the constant and engrossing occupation that enabled this contented traveller to accept with equanimity the ill-luck of kelt-catching; it was a hobby he could carry about with him everywhere; it gave a continuous interest to every hour of his life. He cared little for the analyses of science; he cared less for philosophical systems; metaphysics he laughed at; but men and women—the problems of their lives and surroundings, their diverse fortunes and aspirations and dealings with each other—that was the one and constant subject that engrossed his interest. No doubt there was a little more than this; it was not merely as an abstract study that he was so fond of getting to know how people lived. The fact was that, even after having made ample provision for his family, he still remained possessed of a large fortune; his own expenditure was moderate; and he liked to go about with the consciousness that here or there, as occasion served, he could play the part of a little Providence. It was a harmless vanity; moreover, he was a shrewd man, not likely to be deceived by spurious appeals for charity. Many was the young artist whom he had introduced to buyers; many the young clerk whom he had helped to a better situation; more than one young woman in the humblest of circumstances had suddenly found herself enabled to purchase her wedding outfit (with a trifle over, towards the giving her greater value in her lover's eyes), through the mysterious benevolence of some unknown benefactor. This man had been brought up in a country where every one is restlessly pushing forward; and being possessed of abundant means, and a friendly disposition, it seemed the most natural thing in the world that here or

there, at a fitting opportunity, he should lend a helping hand. And there was always this possibility present to him — this sense of power — as he made those minute inquiries of his into the conditions of the lives of those amongst whom he chanced to be living.

The short winter day was drawing to a close; the brilliant steely blue of the driven water had given place to a livid gray; and the faint gleams of saffron-yellow were dying out in the western skies.

"Suppose we'd better be going home now," Mr. Hodson remarked at a venture, and with no great disappointment in his tone.

"I'm afraid, sir, there's no such chance now," Ronald said.

"We must call again; they're not at home to-day," the other remarked, and began with much complacency to reel in one of the lines.

He was doing so slowly, and the men were as slowly pulling in for the shore in the gathering dusk, when *whirr!* went the other reel. The loud and sudden shriek in this silence was a startling thing; and no less so was the springing into the air—at apparently an immense distance away—of some creature, kelt or salmon, that fell into the water again with a mighty splash. Instinctively Mr. Hodson had gripped this rod, and passed the other one he had been reeling in to Strang. It was an anxious moment. *Whirr!* went another dozen yards of line; and again the fish sprang into the air—this time plainly visible.

"A clean fish, sir! a clean fish!" was the welcome cry.

But there was no time to hazard doubts or ask questions; this sudden visitor at the end of the line had not at all made up his mind to be easily captured. First of all he came sailing in quietly towards the boat, giving the fisherman all he could do to reel in and keep a strain on him; then he whirled out the line so suddenly that the rod was nearly bent double; and then, in deep water, he kept persistently sulking and boring, refusing to yield an inch. This was a temporary respite.

"Well, now, is this one all right?" Mr. Hodson called out—but he was rather bewildered, for he knew not what this violent beast might not be after next, and the gathering

darkness looked strange, the shadows of Clebrig overhead seeming to blot out the sky.

"A clean fish, sir," was the confident answer.

"No doubt o' that, sir," even the melancholy Duncan admitted; for he foresaw a dram now, if not a tip in actual money.

Then slowly and slowly the salmon began to yield to the strain on him—which was considerable, for this was the heavier of the two rods—and quickly the line was got in, the pliant curve of the rod remaining always the same; while Mr. Hodson flattered himself that he was doing very well now, and that he was surely becoming the master of the situation. But the next instant something happened that his mind was not rapid enough to comprehend: something dreadful and horrible and sudden: there was a whirring out of the reel so rapid that he had to lower the point of the rod almost to the water; then the fish made one flashing spring along the surface—and this time he saw the creature, a gleam of silver in the dusk—and then, to his unspeakable dismay and mortification, he felt the line quite slack. He did utter a little monosyllable.

"He's off, sir," the melancholy gillie said in a tone of sad resignation.

"Not a bit, sir, not a bit! Reel in, quick!" Ronald called to him: and the fisherman had sense enough to throw the rod as far back as he could to see if there was yet some strain on it. Undoubtedly the fish was still there. Moreover, this last cantrip seemed to have taken the spirit out of him. By and by, with a strong, steady strain on him, he suffered himself to be guided more and more towards the boat, until, now and again, they could see a faint gleam in the dark water; and now Ronald had relinquished his oar, and was crouching down in the stern—this time not with the landing-net in his hand, but with the bright steel clip just resting on the gunwale.

"He's showing the white feather now, sir; give him a little more of the butt."

However, he had not quite given in yet: each time he came in sight of the boat he would make another ineffectual rush, but rarely getting down deeper than three or four

yards. And then, with a short line and the butt well towards him, he began to make slow semicircles this way and that; and always he was being steadily hauled nearer the coble; until with one quick dip and powerful upward pull Ronald had got him transfixed on the gaff and landed —the huge, gleaming, beautiful silver creature!—in the bottom of the boat.

"Well done, sir!—a clean fish!—a beauty—the first caught in Scotland this year, I know!"—these were the exclamations he heard now; but he scarcely knew how it had all happened, for he had been more excited than he was aware of. He felt a vague and general sense of satisfaction; wanted to give the men a glass of whisky, and had none to give them; thought that the capture of a salmon was a noble thing; would have liked his daughter Carry to hear the tidings at once; and had a kind of general purpose to devote the rest of that year to salmon-fishing in the Highlands. From this entrancement he was awakened by a dispute between the two men as to the size of the fish.

"He's twelve pounds, and no more," the melancholy Duncan said, eyeing him all over.

"Look at his shoulders, man," Ronald rejoined. "Fourteen pounds if he's an ounce. Duncan, lad, ye've been put off your guessing by the sight of the kelt."

"He's a good fish whateffer," Duncan was constrained to admit—for he still foresaw that prospect of a dram when they returned to the inn, with perhaps a more substantial handselling of good luck.

Of course, they could do no more fishing that afternoon, for it was nearly dark; but it was wonderful how the capture of this single salmon seemed to raise the spirits of the little party as they got ashore and walked home. There was a kind of excitement in the evening air. They talked in a rapid and eager way—about what the fish had done; what were the chances of such and such a rush; the probable length of time it had been up from the sea; the beauty of its shape; the smallness of its head; the freshness of its colour, and so forth—and there was a kind of jubilation abroad. The first fish caught in Scotland that year!—of course, *it must* be packed forthwith and sent

south to his daughter Carry and her friends. And Mr. Hodson was quite facetious with the pretty Nelly when she came in to lay the table for dinner; and would have her say whether she had not yet fixed her mind on one or other of these young fellows around. As for the small hamlet of Inver-Mudal, it was about as solitary and forlorn a habitation as any to be found in the wilds of northern Scotland; and he was there all by himself; but with the blazing peat-fire, and the brilliant white cloth on the dinner-table, and the consciousness that the firm, stout-shouldered, clean-run fourteen-pounder was lying in the dairy on a slab of cold stone, he considered that Inver-Mudal was a most enjoyable and sociable and comfortable place, and that he had not felt himself so snug and so much at home for many and many a day.

CHAPTER IV.

A LETTER.

AFTER dinner he found himself with a pretty long evening before him, and thought he could not do better than devote the major part of it to writing to his daughter. He would not confess to himself that he wanted her to know at once that he had caught his first salmon; that was but a trivial incident in the life of a philosopher and student of mankind; still she would be glad to hear of his adventures; and it was not an unpleasant way of passing the time. So he wrote as follows:—

"MY DARLING CARRY—You will be rejoiced to learn that I have discovered a harbour of refuge for you, where that minute organ you call your mind may lay aside its heaviest load of trouble. Here, at last, is one corner of Europe where you need have no fear of anybody mistaking you for one of the Boston girls of fiction; indeed you might go about all day talking your beloved Texas with impunity; although, my dear young lady, that is a habit you would do well to drop, for sooner or later it will get you into trouble when you are least expecting it. But short of scalping children or using a bowie-knife for a fork, I think you might do or say anything you pleased here; it is the most out-of-the

world sort of place; a community of fifteen or twenty, I should guess, hidden away in a hole of a valley, and separated from the rest of the universe by great ranges of mountains and interminable miles of moorland. The people seem very friendly, but shy; and I don't quite catch on to them yet, for their speech bothers me—scarcely any two of them seem to have the same accent; but I hope to get to know something more about them next Monday, when they have a New Year celebration, which I am invited to the same. Would you like to join in? By all means come if you care to; the station is Lairg; wire, and I will meet you there. You will miss the wild excitement of paying afternoon calls and drinking tea; but you will get sunlight and fresh air into your lungs. The talk about the fierce weather is all nonsense. There is a sprinkling of snow on the higher hills, but the temperature is quite agreeable. In any case I expect you to come here with me in March, when the salmon-fishing will begin in earnest; and I have no doubt you will have made the acquaintance of the whole of the people in a couple of days, shy as they are. There is another point I have not forgotten. As you seem determined to set yourself up for your lifetime with reminiscences of your travels in Europe, I have had to consider what you could carry away from here. I am afraid that Inver-Mudal jewellery wouldn't make much of a show; and I haven't seen any shell necklaces or silk scarves or blue pots about. But what about a Highland maid? I suppose the N.Y. Customs officers wouldn't charge much for that article of *vertu*. Now the maid who waits on me here is very pretty and gentle in manner; and I suppose she could be induced to go—for a proper consideration; and you could begin the training of her now, and have her quite accomplished by the time we got home. Sounds rather like slavery, don't it?—but she would be going to the land of the free, and the banner would wave over her. She gets eighty dollars a year and her board; I'd go better than that, if you took a fancy to her.

"But the most remarkable person here—perhaps it is the contrast between his personal abilities and his position that is the striking thing—is a deerstalker and gamekeeper whom they familiarly call Ronald; and I confess that,

with all I had heard of the intelligence of the Scotch peasantry, this fellow, before I had been talking with him ten minutes, rather made me open my eyes. And yet, looking back over the different subjects we fell upon, I don't know that he said anything so very remarkable on any one of them. I think it is rather the personal character of the man that is impressive—the manliness and independence of his judgment, and yet his readiness to consider the other side if you can convince him; his frank (and, I should say, foolish) recognition of the differences of social position; and then a kind of curious self-respect he has which refuses to allow him to become quite friendly, though you may be willing enough to forget that you are talking of taking a shooting on which he is one of the *employés*, and anxious only to converse with him as man to man. I'm afraid this is rather mixed, but you would have to see him to understand quite well what manner of person he is —a good-looking fellow too, well knit together, with a keen, hard face, full of life and a half-concealed force of humour. I should judge he would make a pretty fair king of good company in the unrestrained intercourse of a few boon companions; and I imagine he has a hard head if there should be any drinking going on. What to do with him I don't know. It is absurd he should be where he is. His brother has been to college, taken his degree, and is now in the Scotch Church somewhere. But this fellow seems quite content to trap foxes and shoot gray crows, and, in the autumn, look after the grouse-shooting and deerstalking of other people. A man of his brains would not be in that position for a fortnight in our country. Here everything is fixed. He thinks it is *natural* for him to be in a subservient position. And yet there is a curious independence about the fellow; I don't know what inducement I could put before him to get him out of it. Suppose we said, 'Come you with us to America, and we'll run you for President;' I'm afraid he'd quote Kingsley in our face, and be off to 'where the dun deer lie.' In fact his reverence for the star-spangled banner appears to be of a mitigated description. I found he knew more than I expected about our wire-pulling gentry at home; but then, on the other hand, I discovered that he knew nothing

about the necessity of protecting the industries of a young country beyond what he had read in the English papers, and you know what high old Mother Hubbardism that is. Now I want to do something for this fellow, and don't know how. He's too good a man to be thrown away—a kind of upper servant, as it were, of his lordship. He has plenty of ability and he has plenty of knowledge in a dozen different directions, if they could only be *applied*. But then he is a dogged kind of a creature—he is not pliant; if you can show him sufficient reason for changing he might change, otherwise not one inch will he budge. What is the inducement to be? It is useless offering him an allotment of land in Nebraska; here he has miles and miles of the most picturesque territory conceivable, of which, save for a month or two in the autumn, he is the absolute master. He enjoys an ownership over these hills and moors and lochs more obvious than that of the Duke himself; he would not exchange that for the possession of a bit of table-land on the Platte Valley, unless he were a fool, and that he is far from being. The Presidentship? Well, I waved your beloved banner over him, but he didn't enthuse worth a cent. However, I must cast about and see what is to be done with him, for I am really interested in the man."

At this moment there was a tapping at the door, and Nelly appeared with a huge armful of peats, which she began to build up dexterously in the fireplace, always leaving a central funnel open.

"Say, my girl, when will this letter go south?" Mr. Hodson asked.

"To-morrow moarning," was the answer.

"And the fish, too?"

"Yes, sir, by the mail cart."

"Has Duncan packed it in the rushes yet?"

"Oh no, sir, Ronald will do that; he can do it better as any of them; he would not let any one else do it, for they're saying it iss the first fish of the year, and he's very proud of your getting the fish, sir."

"*Ich auch!*" observed Mr. Hodson to himself; and he would probably have continued the conversation, but that suddenly a strange noise was heard, coming from some

distant part of the inn—a harsh, high note, all in monotone.

"What's that now, Nelly?"

"It will be Ronald tuning his pipes," said she, as she was going to the door.

"Oh, he can play the pipes too?"

"Indeed, yes, sir; and better as any in Sutherland, I hef heard them say," she added.

Just as she opened the door the drones and chanter broke away into a shrill and lively march that seemed to flood the house with its penetrating tones.

"I think it's 'Dornoch Links' he's playing," Nelly said, with a quiet smile, "for there's some of the fisher-lads come through on their way to Tongue."

She left then; but the solitary occupant of the sitting-room thought he could not do better than go to the door and listen for a while to this strange sort of music, which he had never heard played properly before. And while he could scarcely tell one tune from another except by the time—the slow, wailing, melancholy Lament, for example, was easily enough distinguished from the bright and lively Strathspey—here and there occurred an air—the "79th's Farewell," or the "Barren Rocks of Aden," or the "Pibroch of Donald Dhu," had he but known the names of them—which had a stately and martial ring about it; he guessed that it was meant to lead the tramp of soldiers. And he said to himself—

"Here, now, is this fellow, who might be piper to a Highland regiment, and I daresay all the use he makes of his skill is to walk up and down outside the dining-room window of the Lodge and play to a lot of white-kneed Englishmen when they come down for the autumn shooting."

He returned to his letter.

"I have the honour to inform you that the first salmon caught on any Scotch loch this year was caught by me this afternoon, and to-morrow will be on its way to you. If you don't believe the story, look at the salmon itself for evidence. And as regards this loch-fishing, it appears to me you might have a turn at it when we come up in March—taking one of the two rods; a little practice with Indian

clubs meanwhile would enable you to make a better fight of it when you have to keep a continuous strain on a fourteen-pound fish for twenty minutes or half an hour. You must have some amusement or occupation; for there is no society—except, by the way, the doctor's daughter, who might be a companion for you. I have not seen her yet; but the handmaiden I have mentioned above informs me that she is 'a ferry pretty young lady, and ferry much thought of, and of a ferry great family too.' I should not imagine, however, that her Highland pride of blood would bar the way against your making her acquaintance; her father is merely the parish doctor—or rather, the district doctor, for he has either two or three parishes to look after—and I don't suppose his emoluments are colossal. They have a pretty cottage; it is the swell feature of the village, if you can call the few small and widely scattered houses a village. You could practise Texas talk on her all day long; I daresay she wouldn't know.

"Good-night; it's rather sleepy work being out in that boat in the cold. Good-night, good-night; and a kiss from the Herr Papa."

Well, by this time the fisher-lads had left the inn and were off on the way to Tongue—and glad enough to have a moonlight night for the weary trudge. Ronald remained behind for a while, drinking a glass of ale with the innkeeper; and generally having to keep his wits about him, for there was a good deal of banter going on. Old John Murray was a facetious person, and would have it that Nelly was setting her cap at Ronald; while the blushing Nelly, for her part, declared that Ronald was nothing but a poor south-country body; while he in fair warfare had to retort that she was "as Hielan's a Mull drover." The quarrel was not a deadly one; and when Ronald took up his pipes in order to go home, he called out to her in parting—

"Nelly, lass, see you get the lads to clean out the barn ere Monday next; and put on your best ribbons, lassie; I'm thinking they'll be for having a spring o' Tullochgorum."

The pipes were over his shoulder as he walked away along the moonlit road; but he did not tune up; he had had enough playing for that evening. And be sure that in his mind there was no discontent because he had no allot-

ment of land on the Platte Valley, nor yet a place in a Chicago bank, nor the glory of being pipe-major to a Highland regiment. He was perfectly content as he was; and knew naught of these things. If there was any matter troubling him—on this still and moonlight night, as he walked blithely along, inhaling the keen sweet air, and conscious of the companionship of the faithful Harry—it was that the jog-trot kind of tune he had invented for certain verses did not seem to have sufficient definiteness about it. But then the verses themselves—as they kept time to his tramp on the road—were careless and light-hearted enough:

The blossom was white on the blackthorn tree,
And the mavis was singing rarely;
When Meenie, Love Meenie, walked out wi' me,
All in the springtime early.

"Meenie, Love Meenie, your face let me see,
Meenie, come answer me fairly;
Meenie, Love Meenie, will you wed me,
All in the springtime early?"

Meenie but laughed; and kentna the pain
That shot through my heart fu' sairly:
"Kind sir, it's a maid that I would remain,
All in the springtime early."

And "Hey, Harry, lad," he was saying, as he entered the cottage and went into the little parlour, where a candle had been left burning, "we'll have our supper together now; for between you and me I'm just as hungry as a gled."

CHAPTER V.

BEGINNINGS.

NEXT day promised to give them sharper work on the loch. The weather had changed towards the morning; showers of hail had fallen; and now all the hills around—Ben Hee and Ben Hope and Ben Loyal—had their far peaks and shoulders powdered over, while the higher slopes and summit of the giant Clebrig were one solid mass of white. It was much colder, too; and the gusts of wind that

came hurling along Strath Terry * struck down on the loch, spreading out like black fans, and driving the darkened water into curling crisp foam. It was a wild, changeable, blowy morning; sunlight and gloom intermingled; and ever the wind howled and moaned around the house, and the leafless trees outside bent and shivered before the wintry blast.

When the tall Highland lass brought in breakfast it appeared that the recusant gillie had not yet come down from Tongue; but it was no matter, she said; she would call Ronald. Now this exactly suited Mr. Hodson, who wanted to have some further speech with the young man —in view of certain far-reaching designs he had formed; and what better opportunity for talk than the placid trolling for salmon on the lake there? But courtesy demanded some small protest.

"I am afraid I cannot ask him a second day," he remarked.

"Oh," said she (for she did not wish the gentleman to imagine that she thought over much of the smart young keeper), "he ought to be ferry glad if he can be of use to any one. He is jist amusing himself with the other lads."

Which was strictly true at this moment. On the little plateau outside Ronald's cottage two or three of them were standing together. They had got a heavy iron ball, to which was attached about a yard and a half of rope, and one after another was trying who could launch this ball the farthest, after swinging it three or four times round his head. It came to Ronald's turn. He was not the most thick-set of those young fellows; but he was wiry and muscular. He caught the rope with both hands, swung the heavy weight round his head some four or five times— his teeth getting ever and ever more firmly clenched the while—and then away went the iron ball through the air, not only far outstripping all previous efforts, but unluckily landing in a wheelbarrow and smashing sadly a jacket which one of the lads had thrown there when he entered upon this competition. When he somewhat ruefully took

* No doubt corrupted from *Strath Tairbh*, the Strath of the Bull.

up the rent garment, there was much ironical laughing; perhaps that was the reason that none of them heard Nelly calling.

"Ronald!"

The tall, slim Highland maid was pretty angry by this time. She had come out of the house without any head-gear on; and the cold wind was blowing her yellow hair about her eyes; and she was indignant that she had to walk so far before attracting the attention of those idle lads.

"Ronald, do you hear!" she called; and she would not move another yard towards them.

And then he happened to notice her.

"Well, lass, what is't ye want?"

"Come away at once!" she called, in not the most friendly way. "The gentleman wants you to go down to the loch."

But he was the most good-natured of all these young fellows; the lasses about ordered him this way or that just as they pleased.

"What!" he called to her, "hasna Fraser come down from Tongue yet?"

"No, he has not."

"Bless us; the whisky must have been strong," said he, as he picked up his jacket. "I'll be there in a minute, Nelly."

And so it was that when Mr. Hodson went into the little front hall, he found everything in trim readiness for getting down to the loch—the proper minnows selected; traces tried; luncheon packed; and his heavy waterproof coat slung over Ronald's arm.

"Seems you think I can't carry my own coat?" Mr. Hodson said; for he did not like to see this man do anything in the shape of servant work; whereas Ronald performed these little offices quite naturally and as a matter of course.

"I'll take it, sir," said he; "and if you're ready now we'll be off. Come along, Duncan."

And he was striding away with his long deerstalker step, when Mr. Hodson stopped him.

"Wait a bit, man; I will walk down to the loch with you."

So Duncan went on, and the American and Ronald followed.

"Sharp this morning."

"Rayther sharp."

"But this must be a very healthy life of yours—out in the fresh air always—plenty of exercise—and so forth."

"Just the healthiest possible, sir."

"But monotonous a little?"

"'Deed no, sir. A keeper need never be idle if he minds his business; there's always something new on hand."

"Then we'll say it is a very enjoyable life, so long as your health lasts, and you are fit for the work?"

This was apparently a question.

"Well, sir, the head stalker on the Rothie-Mount forest is seventy-two years of age; and there is not one of the young lads smarter on the hill than he is."

"An exception, doubtless. The betting is all against your matching that record. Well, take your own case: what have you to look forward to as the result of all your years of labour? I agree with you that in the meantime it is all very fine; I can understand the fascination of it, even, and the interest you have in becoming acquainted with the habits of the various creatures, and so forth. Oh yes, I admit that—the healthiness of the life, and the interest of it; and I daresay you get more enjoyment out of the shooting and stalking than Lord Ailine, who pays such a preposterous price for it. But say we give you a fairly long lease of health and strength sufficient for the work: we'll take you at sixty; what then? Something happens—rheumatism, a broken leg, anything—that cripples you. You are superseded; you are out of the running; what is to become of you?"

"Well, sir," said Ronald instantly, "I'm thinking his lordship wouldna think twice about giving a pension to a man that had worked for him as long as that."

It was a luckless answer. For Mr. Hodson, whose first article of belief was that all men are born equal, had come to Europe with a positive resentment against the very existence of lords, and a detestation of any social system that awarded *them position* and prestige merely on account

of the accident of their birth. And what did he find now? Here was a young fellow of strong natural character, of marked ability, and fairly independent spirit, so corrupted by this pernicious system that he looked forward quite naturally to being helped in his old age by his lordship—by one of those creatures who still wore the tags and rags of an obsolete feudalism, and were supposed to "protect" their vassals. The House of Peers had a pretty bad time of it during the next few minutes; if the tall, sallow-faced, gray-eyed man talked with little vehemence, his slow, staccato sentences had a good deal of keen irony in them. Ronald listened respectfully. And perhaps the lecture was all the more severe that the lecturer had but little opportunity of delivering it in his own domestic circle. Truly it was hard that his pet grievance won for him nothing but a sarcastic sympathy there; and that it was his own daughter who flouted him with jibes and jeers.

"Why, you know, pappa dear," she would say as she stood at the window of their hotel in Piccadilly, and watched the carriages passing to and fro beneath her, "lords may be bad enough, but you know they're not half as bad as the mosquitoes are at home. They don't worry one half as much; seems to me you might live in this country a considerable time and never be worried by one of them. Why, that's the worst of it. When I left home, I thought the earls and marquises would just be crowding us; and they don't seem to come along at all. I confess they are a mean lot. Don't they know well enough that the first thing ["the fooist thing," she said, of course; but her accent sounded quite quaint and pretty if you happened to be looking at the pretty, soft, opaque, dark eyes] the first thing an American girl has to do when she gets to Europe is to have a lord propose to her, and to reject him? But how can I? They won't come along! It's just too horrid for anything; for of course when I go back home they'll say—'It's because you're not a Boston girl. London's full of lords; but it's only Boston girls they run after; and, poor things, they and their coronets are always being rejected. The noble pride of a Republican country; wave the banner!'"

But here Mr. Hodson met with no such ill-timed and

flippant opposition. Ronald the keeper listened respectfully, and only spoke when spoken to; perhaps the abstract question did not interest him. But when it came to the downright inquiry as to whether he, Strang, considered his master, Lord Ailine, to be in any way whatever a better man than himself, his answer was prompt.

"Yes, sir, he is," he said, as they walked leisurely along the road. "He is a better man than me by two inches round the chest, as I should guess. Why, sir, the time that I hurt my kneecap, one night we were coming down Ben Strua, our two selves, nothing would hinder his lordship but he must carry me on his back all the way down the hill and across the burn till we reached the shepherd's bothy. Ay, and the burn in spate; and the night as dark as pitch; one wrong step on the swing-bridge, and both of us were gone. There's Peter McEachran at Tongue, that some of them think's the strongest man in these parts; and I offered to bet him five shillings he wouldna carry me across that bridge—let alone down the hill—on a dark night. But would he try? Not a bit, sir."

"I should think Peter Mac—what's his name?—was a wiser man than to risk his neck for five shillings," Mr. Hodson said drily. "And you—you would risk yours—for what?"

"Oh, they were saying things about his lordship," Ronald said carelessly.

"Then he is not worshipped as a divinity by everybody?" the American said shrewdly.

But the keeper answered, with much nonchalance—

"I suppose he has his ill-wishers and his well-wishers, like most other folk; and I suppose, like most other folk, he doesna pay ower great attention to what people say of him."

They did not pursue the subject further at this moment, for a turn of the road brought them suddenly within sight of a stranger, and the appearance of a stranger in these parts was an event demanding silence and a concentration of interest. Of course, to Ronald Strang Miss Meenie Douglas was no stranger; but she was obviously a source of some embarrassment: the instant he caught sight of her

his face reddened, and as she approached he kept his eyes fixed on the ground. It was not that he was ashamed she should see him acting the part of a gillie; for that he did not care in the least, it was as much a part of his work as anything else; what vexed him was lest some sign of recognition should show the stranger gentleman that Miss Douglas had formed the acquaintance of the person who was at the moment carrying his waterproof and his fishing-rods. And he hoped that Meenie would have the sense to go by without taking any notice of him; and he kept his eyes on the road, and walked forward in silence.

"Who is she?" Mr. Hodson asked, in an undertone, and with some astonishment, for he had no idea there was any such neatly-dressed and pretty young lady in the neighbourhood.

Ronald did not answer, and they drew nearer. Indeed, Meenie was looking quite beautiful this morning; for the cold air had brightened up the colour in her cheeks; and the wide-apart blue-gray eyes were clear and full of light; and her brown hair, if it was tightly braided and bound behind, had in front been blown about a little by the wind, and here and there a stray curl appeared on the fair white forehead. And then again her winter clothing seemed to suit the slight and graceful figure; she looked altogether warm, and furry, and nice, and comfortable; and there was a sensible air about her dress—the blue serge skirt, the tight-fitting sealskin coat (but this was a present from the laird of Glengask and Orosay), and the little brown velvet hat with its wing of ptarmigan plumage (this was a present not from Glengask, and probably was not of the value of three halfpence, but she wore it, nevertheless, when she was at her smartest). And if Ronald thought she was going to pass him by without a word, he was mistaken. It was not her way. As she met them, one swift glance of her Highland eyes was all she bestowed on the stranger; then she said, pleasantly, as she passed—

"Good morning, Ronald."

He was forced to look up.

"Good morning, Miss Douglas," said he, with studied respect; and they went on.

"Miss Douglas?" Mr. Hodson repeated, as soon as

they were beyond hearing. "The doctor's daughter, I presume?"

"Yes, sir."

"But—but—I had no idea—why, she is a most uncommonly pretty young lady—one of the most interesting faces I have seen for many a day. You did not say there was such a charming young person in the place; why, she adds a new interest altogether; I fancy my daughter won't be long in making her acquaintance when she comes here."

Indeed, as they got down to the boat, and the two men set about getting the rods ready, all his talk was about the pretty young lady he had seen; and he scarcely noticed that Ronald, in answering these questions, showed a very marked reserve. He could not be got to speak of her except in curt answers; perhaps he did not like to have the melancholy Duncan listening; at all events, he showed a quite absorbing interest in the phantom minnows, and traces, and what not. Moreover, when they got into the boat, there was but little opportunity for conversation. The day had become more and more squally; there was a considerable sea on; it was all the two men could do to keep sufficient way on the coble so that the phantoms should spin properly. Then every few minutes a rain-cloud would come drifting across—at first mysterious and awful, as if the whole world were sinking into darkness; then a few big drops would patter about; then down came the sharp clattering shower, only to be followed by a marvellous clearing up again, and a burst of watery sunshine along the Clebrig slopes. But these changes kept Mr. Hodson employed in sheltering himself from the rain while it lasted, and then getting off his waterproof again lest perchance there might come a salmon at one of the lines. That event did actually occur; and when they least expected it. In one of the heaviest of the squalls they had such a fight to get the boat along that the minnows, sinking somewhat, caught the bottom. Of course the rowers had to back down—or rather to drift down—to get the lines released; and altogether the prospect of affairs seemed so unpromising—the heavens darkening with further rain, the wind blowing in sharper and sharper gusts, and the water coming heavily over the bows—*that* Mr. Hodson called out that, as soon

as he had got the minnows free, they might as well run the coble on to the land, and wait for calmer weather. But this was a lee shore. The men were willing to give up for a time—but not until they had got to the sheltered side; so he was counselled to put out the lines again, slowly, and they began anew their fight against the gale. Well, he was actually paying out the first of the lines with his hand, when suddenly—and without any of the preliminary warnings that usually tell of a salmon being after a minnow—the line was snatched from his fingers, and out went the reel with that sharp long shriek that sends the whole boat's crew into an excitement of expectation. But there was no spring into the air away along there in the darkened and plunging waters; as he rapidly got in his line, he knew only of a dull and heavy strain; and the men had to keep on with their hard pulling against the wind, for the fish seemed following the boat in this sulky and heavy fashion.

"What do you think?" Mr. Hodson said, half turning round, and not giving plainer voice to his anxieties.

"I'm afraid it's a kelt, sir," the dismal gillie answered.

"Looks like it, don't it?" the fisherman said rather dolefully; for the fish showed no sign of life whatever.

"We'll see by and by," was Ronald's prudent answer; but even he was doubtful; the only good feature being that, if the fish showed no fight, at least he kept a heavy strain on the rod.

But it seemed as if everything was conspiring against them. The black heavens above them burst into a torrent of rain; and with that came a squall that tore the water white, and blew them down on the fish in spite of their hardest efforts. Shorter and shorter grew the line as it was rapidly got in, and still the fish did not show; it was now so near to the boat that any sudden movement on its part was almost certain to produce a catastrophe. Nor could they drive the boat ashore; the beach was here a mass of sharp stones and rocks; in three minutes the coble would have been stove in. With faces set hard the two men pulled and pulled against the storm of wind and rain; and Mr. Hodson—seated now, for he dared not attempt to stand up, the boat was being thrown about so by the heavy waves

—could only get in a little more line when he had the chance, and look helplessly on, and wait.

Then, all of a sudden, there was a long shrill shriek—heard loud above the din of wind and water—continued and continued, and in vain he tried to arrest this wild rush; and then, some seventy or eighty yards away, there was a great white splash among the rushing black waves—and another—and another—and then a further whirling out of some fifteen yards of line, until he glanced with alarm at the slender quantity left on the reel. But presently he began to get some in again; the men were glad to let the boat drift down slowly; harder and harder he worked at the big reel, and at last he came to fighting terms with the animal—kelt or salmon, as it might be—with some five-and twenty yards out, and the squall moderating a little, so that the men could keep the boat as they wanted. Nay, he ventured to stand up now, wedging his legs and feet so that he should not be suddenly thrown overboard; and it was quite evident, from the serious purpose of his face, that all possibility of this being a kelt had now been thrown aside.

"No kelt is he, Ronald?" he called aloud.

"Not a bit, sir! There's no kelt about that one. But give him time; he's a good big fish, or I'm sore mistaken."

They were far from the end yet, however. The long rush and the splashing had exhausted him for a while; and the fisherman, with a firm application of the butt, thought he could make the fish show himself; but still he kept boring steadily down, sometimes making little angry rushes of a dozen yards or so. And then all of a sudden began some wild cantrips. There was another rush of ten or a dozen yards; and a clear leap into the air—a beautiful, great, silvery creature he looked amid all this hurrying gloom; and then another downward rush; and then he came to the surface again, and shook and tugged and struck with his tail until the water was foaming white about him. These were a few terribly anxious seconds, but all went happily by, and then it was felt that the worst of the fighting was over. After that there was but the sullen refusal to come near the boat—the short sheering off whenever he saw it or one of the oars; but now, in the slow curves through the water,

he was beginning to show the gleam of his side; and Ronald was crouching down in the stern, gaff in hand.

"Steady, sir, steady," he was saying, with his eye on those slow circles; "give him time, he's no done yet; a heavy fish, sir—a good fish that—twenty pounds, I'm thinking—come along, my beauty, come along—*the butt now, sir!*" And then, as the great gleaming fish, head up, came sheering along on its side, there was a quick dive of the steel clip, and the next second the splendid creature was in the bottom of the coble.

Mr. Hodson sank down on to his seat; it had been a long fight—over half an hour; he was exhausted with the strain of keeping himself balanced; and he was also (what he had not perceived in this long spell of excitement) wet to the skin. He pulled out a spirit-flask from the pocket of his waterproof—as ill-luck would have it, that useful garment happened to be lying in the bottom of the boat when the fight began—and gave the two men a liberal dram; he then took a sip himself; and when there had been a general quarrel over the size of the fish—nineteen the lowest, twenty-two the highest guess—they began to consider what they ought to do next. The weather looked very ugly. It was resolved to get up to the head of the loch anyhow, and there decide; and so the men took to their oars again, and began to force their way through the heavy and white-crested waves.

But long ere they had reached the head of the loch Mr. Hodson had become aware of a cold feeling about his shoulders and back, and quickly enough he came to the conclusion that sitting in an open boat, with clothes wet through, on a January day, did not promise sufficient happiness. He said they might put him ashore as soon as possible.

"Indeed, sir, it's no much use going on in this weather," Ronald said, "unless maybe you were to try the fly."

"I thought you said it was rather early for the fly."

"Raythor early," Ronald admitted.

"Rawther," said Duncan.

"Anyhow," observed Mr. Hodson, "I don't feel like sitting in this boat any longer in wet clothes. I'm going back to the inn right now; maybe the afternoon will clear up—and then we might have another try."

They got ashore at last, and Mr. Hodson at once started off for the inn; and when the two men had got the rods taken down, and the fish tied head and tail for the better carrying of it, they set out too. But Ronald seemed unusually depressed and silent. Where was the careless joke —the verse of an idle song—with which he was wont to brave the discomforts of wind and weather? The two men strode along without a word; and it was not likely that Duncan the dismal should be the first to break the silence. Nay, when they got to the inn, Ronald would not go in for a minute or two, as was his custom, to see the fish weighed and have a chat. He went on to his own cottage; got the key of the kennel; and presently he and the dogs were leaving the little scattered hamlet, taking the lonely moorland road that led away up the Mudal valley.

He knew not why he was so ill at ease; but something had gone wrong. Had his mind been disturbed and disquieted by the American gentleman's plainly hinting to him that he was living in a fool's paradise; and that old age, and illness, and the possible ingratitude of his master were things to be looked forward to? Or was it that the sudden meeting with Meenie, with this stranger looking on, seemed to have revealed to him all at once how far away she was from him? If she and he had met, as every day they did, and passed with the usual friendly greeting, it would all have been quite simple and ordinary enough; but with this stranger looking on,—and she appearing so beautiful and refined and neatly dressed, and wearing moreover the present given her by Glengask and Orosay—while he, on the other hand, was carrying the gentleman's waterproof and a bundle of rods—well, that was all different somehow. And why had she said "Good-morning!" with such a pointed friendliness? He did not wish this stranger to imagine that Miss Douglas and he were even acquaintances. And then he thought that that very night he would burn all those stupid verses he had written about her; that secret and half-regretful joy of his—of imagining himself in a position that would entitle him to address her so—was all too daring and presuming. It is true, she wore the ptarmigan's wing she had begged him to get for her (and never in all the years had he so gladly sped up the Clebrig slopes as when

she sent him on that errand), but that was a trifle; any young lady, if she wanted such a thing, would naturally ask the nearest gamekeeper. And then the other young lady —the American young lady—when she came, and made Meenie's acquaintance: would not they be much together? Meenie would be still farther and farther away then. He would himself have to keep studiously aloof if in the generosity of her heart she wished to be as friendly as ever.

Well, these were not very bitter or tragic thoughts; and yet—and yet—there was something wrong. He scarcely knew what it was, but only that the little hamlet—as he returned to it after a long and solitary wandering—did not seem to be the simple and natural and happy place that it used to be. But one thing he was glad of. The second gillie had now arrived from Tongue. Consequently his services would no longer be needed in the coble; he would return to his own ways; and be his own master. And as for companions?—well, Clebrig and he had long been friends.

CHAPTER VI.

A PROGRAMME.

THAT same evening little Maggie, having made herself as smart and neat as possible, went along the dark road to the doctor's house, was admitted, and forthwith passed upstairs to Miss Douglas's own room. It was an exceedingly small apartment; but on this cold winter night it looked remarkably warm and snug and bright, what with the red peats in the fireplace, and the brilliant little lamp on the table; and it was prettily decorated too, with evidences of feminine care and industry everywhere about. And Meenie herself was there—in her gown of plain blue serge; and apparently the had been busy, for the table was littered with patterns and designs and knitting needles and what not, while a large mass of blue worsted was round the back of a chair, waiting for the winding.

"Help me to clear the table, Maggie," she said good-naturedly, when her visitor entered, "and then we will get tea over: I declare I have so many things to think of that I am just driven daft."

"And then she said—with some touch of anger—

"Do you know that I saw your brother—on a cold, wet day like this—and he was walking along the road, with his jacket open, and paying no heed at all to the weather? Maggie, why do you not make him take some care of himself? In January—and he goes about as if it were June! How would you like it if he were to catch a bad cold and have to take to his bed? Why do you not make him take care of himself?"

"He would only laugh at me," the little Maggie said ruefully. "He doesna mind anything. I do my best to get his clothes dried when he comes in wet; but he doesna like to be bothered—especially if he's writing or reading; he says that a pipe keeps the harm away. I'm sure if you would speak to him, Meenie, he would take a great deal more care."

"What, me!" the girl said—and there was a touch of colour in the pretty refined face; and then she added, with a good-humoured smile, "No, he would not mind what I said, I know. But it is little matter; for with such a wilful man you can do nothing except by cunning. Do you see the wool there, Maggie?"

She laughed; but the little, red-haired, freckled girl looked rather frightened.

"Oh no, Meenie, I dare not take it," she said. "He would know I had not the money to buy all that wool; and then he would ask; and I should be scolded——"

"Nonsense, nonsense!" the other cried, in her friendly way. "Do you think a man would ask any such questions? It would never occur to him at all! When the jersey is all knitted and complete, you will just say to him, 'Ronald, here is a jersey that I have knitted for you all by myself; and you are to put it on whenever there is a cold morning;' and you will see he will think your knitting it yourself explains everything. Ask about the wool?—he will never think of such a thing. If you hang the jersey on the nail of his bedroom door, it will be all a matter of course; I should not wonder, now, if he forgot to say 'Thank you.'"

"And then there is another thing," Maggie said, rather timidly and wistfully. "How am I to tell him that I knitted the jersey when you know that you will do the

most of it? For it is always that; you did nearly all the socks that we gave to Ronald; and he thinks it was me."

But here the good humour left Meenie Douglas's face—that was suddenly grown red and embarrassed.

"How can you talk such foolishness?" she said, rather sharply. "If I show you here or there how you are to go on, is that doing the knitting for you? I wonder you have no more sense, Maggie. Of course, I will have to begin the jersey for you; and if I cast on the stitches for the width of the neck, what is that? It is what any one would do for you—Mrs. Murray, or one of the girls at the inn. And I hope you are not going away with that idea in your head; or sooner or later you will be telling somebody that I am knitting a jersey for your brother—that would be a fine thing!"

A timid appealing hand was put on her arm.

"I am sure that Ronald would rather never see or hear of any jersey than have anything make you angry, Meenie."

The trouble was over in a moment: the girl was essentially quick and generous and kind-hearted; and this small lassie was about her only companion. Moreover, tea was brought in at this moment by the maidservant; and so the question of the proportion of work contributed by either of them to Ronald's woollen gear was put aside.

"And what do you think of this now, Maggie?" the elder said, with some eagerness in her face and eyes. "You know the great preparations they are making for Monday night—the long barn is to be cleared; and they are going to have a chimney made and a fireplace; and long tables all the way down, and wooden forms to sit on; and some of the lads, they say, are talking of a chandelier to be made out of hoops, and candles stuck all the way round. And all that trouble for the grown-up folk! Is it fair? Oh, it is quite absurd to have such a deal of trouble; and all for the grown-up people. Now, if Ronald would help me—and you know he is such a favourite he always has his own way with everybody—would it not be a fine thing to ask Mr. Murray to leave all those preparations as they are for a day or two—perhaps till Wednesday—and by that time we could have messages sent to the farms round about, and all the children brought in for a soirée? Why should the grown-up people have everything? And there would be

nobody but ourselves,—that's Ronald and you and I, Maggie,—for the children would have more freedom and amusement that way—you see my father is not likely to be back by then, or we might ask him—and then, with nearly a week, we could send to Tongue for a great many things—and—and—have a splendid children's party just as fine as fine could be."

She was quite excited over this matter.

"Look," she said, going and fetching a sheet of paper which was written over in a bold, large hand (her own handwriting was small and neat enough, but this had been assumed for so important a public purpose); "look at the programme—it is all guess work as yet, of course, for I have not asked Ronald; but I am sure he will help us; and if he says it is to be done, then everything will go right—they will keep the barn for us; and the people will send the children; and those of them who can't go back will stay the night at the inn. I have saved my pocket-money for months for it; but who could have expected such a chance—the barn all fitted up, and the fire to keep it warm, and the chandelier? There now, Maggie, what do you think?"

The little Maggie took up the big sheet of paper, wondering; for all this was a wild and startling project amid the monotony of their life in this remote and small hamlet.

CHILDREN'S SOIRÉE.

Inver-Mudal, Wednesday, January 23.

MR. RONALD STRANG in the Chair.

PROGRAMME.

Psalm . . . . . *Old Hundredth.*

Service of Tea and Cake.

Address . . . . . CHAIRMAN.

Service of Raisins.

Song . "My love she's but a lassie yet." . MR. RONALD STRANG.
Reading . "The Cameronian's Dream." . MISS M. DOUGLAS.
Song . "O dinna cross the burn, Willie." . MR. RONALD STRANG.
Pipe-Music "Lord Breadalbane's March." . MR. RONALD STRANG.

Service of Oranges.

Hymn . "Whither, pilgrims, are you going?" . CHILDREN.
Duet . "Huntingtower." . . . . MISS M. DOUGLAS & MISS M. STRANG.

But at this point Maggie broke into pure affright.

"Oh, Meenie!" she cried—"how can I?—before them all!"

"But only before children!" was the quick remonstrance. "Would you have Ronald do everything? Why, look—an address—a song—a song—a march on the pipes—is he to have no rest at all?"

"But you, Meenie—you can sing so well and without trouble—I know I will spoil everything——"

"No, no, you will spoil nothing; and we will get through very well."

"Ferry well," she said, in spite of her Edinburgh birth; and she was evidently vastly proud of her skill in drawing up so brilliant and varied a programme. Maggie continued her reading—but now in some alarm:

Song	"The Laird o' Cockpen"	MR. RONALD STRANG.
Reading	"Jeanie Morrison."	MISS M. DOUGLAS.

Service of Shortbread.

Song	"Gloomy Winter's now awa'."	MR. RONALD STRANG.
Song	"Auld Lang Syne."	THE COMPANY.
Vote of thanks to the Chairman		MISS M. DOUGLAS.

Finale.

Pipe-Music, "*Caidil gu lo*" (Sleep on till day) MR. RONALD STRANG.

Meenie looked and laughed with pleasure; she was quite proud of her skill of arrangement.

"But, Meenie," her companion said, "why have ye not put down a duet between you and Ronald? He can sing so well; and you; and that would be prettier far than anything. Do ye no mind the time we were a' away fishing at Loch Loyal; and we were walking back; and Ronald was telling us of what he saw in a theatre in Edinburgh? And when he told us about the young lady's sweetheart coming in a boat at night, and singing to her below the window, you knew what it was well enough—and you tried it together—oh! that was so fine! Will ye no ask him to sing that with ye?"

Meenie's face flushed somewhat; and she would have

evaded the question with a little laugh but that it was repeated. Whereupon she said—

"Why, now, Maggie, you have such a memory! And I have no doubt there was nonsense going on as we were walking back from Loch Loyal—for a beautiful night it was, in the middle of summer, when there is no darkness at all in the skies all the night long. Oh yes, I remember it too; and very well; but it was amongst ourselves; we are not going to have any such nonsense before other people. And if we were to sing 'O hush thee, my baby,' would not the children be thinking it was a hint for them to go away to bed? And besides, surely I have asked Ronald to do enough for us; do you not think he will be surprised, and perhaps angry, when he sees how often his name comes there?"

"Indeed no, I'm sure," Maggie said promptly. "There's just nothing that he wouldna do for you, Meenie."

"But I will wait till I see him in a good humour," said her friend, laughing, "before I ask him for so much."

"Mich," she said; unawares she had caught up a good many of the local touches.

"And do ye think ye could ever find him in an ill-humour wi' you?" Maggie said, almost reproachfully.

There was no answer to the question; the programme was put aside.

"Very well, then," Meenie said, "we will suppose that is settled. And what is next? Why, Maggie, if I had not the brain of a prime minister, I could never get through so many schemes. Oh, this is it: of course we shall be very much obliged to them if they lend us the barn and all its fittings; and we should do something for them in return. And I am sure the lads will be thinking of nothing but the carpentering; and the lasses at the inn will be thinking only of the cooking of the supper, and their own ribbons and frocks. Now, Maggie, suppose you and I were to do something to make the barn look pretty; I am sure Ronald would cut us a lot of fir-branches, for there's nothing else just now; and we could fix them up all round the barn; and then—look here."

She had got a lot of large printed designs; and a heap of stiff paper of various colours.

"We will have to make paper flowers for them, because there's none growing just now; and very well they will look among the fir-branches. Oh yes, very well indeed. Red and white roses do not grow on fir-branches—it does not need the old man of Ross to tell us that; but they will look very well whatever; and then large orange lilies, and anything to make a bold show in so big a place. And if the lads are making a chandelier out of the hoops of a barrel, we will ask them to let us put red worsted round the hoops; that will look very well too. For we must do something to thank them, Maggie; and then, indeed, when it comes to our turn, we will have the chance too of looking at the decorations when we have the children's soirée."

Maggie looked up quickly.

"But, Meenie, you are coming to the party on Monday night too?"

There was no embarrassment on the beautiful, fine, gentle face. She only said—

"Well, no one has asked me."

And the little Maggie flushed with shame and vexation.

"Indeed, now! Did Ronald not speak to you about it?"

"Oh, I have known about it for a long time," she said lightly, "and I was very glad to hear of it, for I thought it was a great chance for me to get the loan of the barn."

"But you—you, Meenie—that they did not ask you first of all!" the younger girl cried. "But it can only be that every one is expected to come—every one except the small children who canna sit up late. And I'm sure I did not expect to go; but Mr. Murray, he was joking and saying that I would have to dance the first dance wi' him; and Ronald said I might be there for a while. But—but—I'm no going if you're no going, Meenie."

"But that is nonsense, Maggie," the other said good-naturedly. "Of course you must go. And I should like well enough——"

"I am sure Mr. Murray would put you at the head of the table—by his own side—and proud, too!" Maggie exclaimed warmly.

"And I am sure I should not wish anything like that,"

Meenie said, laughing. "I would far rather go with you. I would like to see some of the dancing."

"Oh, Meenie," her companion said, with eyes full of earnestness, "did you ever see Ronald dance the sword-dance?"

"No, I have not, Maggie."

"They say there is none can do it like him. And if he would only go to the Highland meetings, he could win prizes and medals—and for the pipe-playing too, and the tossing the caber. There is not one of the lads can come near him; but it is not often that he tries; for he is not proud."

"I am glad that he does not go to the Highland meetings," Meenie said, rather quietly, and with her eyes cast down.

"No, he is not proud," said Maggie, continuing (for she had but the one hero in all the world), "although there is nothing he canna do better than any of them. There was one of the gentlemen said to him last year—the gentleman hadna been shooting very well the day before—he said, 'Ronald, let one of the gillies look after the dogs to-day, and go you and bring your gun, and make up for my mistakes;' and when he came home in the evening, he said, 'It was a clean day's shooting the day; we did not leave one wounded bird or hare behind us.' And another gentleman was saying, 'Ronald, if ye could sell your eyesight, I would give ye five hundred pounds for't.' And Duncan was saying that this gentleman that's come for the fishing, he doesna talk to Ronald about the salmon and the loch, but about everything in the country, and Ronald knows as well as him about such things. And his lordship, too, he writes to Ronald, 'Dear Ronald,' and quite friendly; and when he was going away he gave Ronald his own pipe, that has got a silver band on it, and his tobacco-pouch, with the letters of his name worked in silk. And there's not one can say that Ronald's proud."

Well, this was very idle talk; and moreover it was continued, for the red-haired and freckled little sister was never weary of relating the exploits of her handsome brother—the adventures he had had with wild cats, and stags, and seals, and eagles, *and the like*; and, strangely enough, Miss

Douglas showed no sign of impatience whatever. Nay, she listened with an interest that scarcely allowed her to interrupt with a word; and with satisfaction and approval, to judge by her expression; and all that she would say from time to time—and absently—was:

"But he is so careless, Maggie! Why don't you speak to him? You really must make him more heedful of himself."

However, the night was going by; and Maggie's praises and recitals had come to an end. Meenie went down to the door to see her friend comfortably wrapped up; but there was no need of escort; the stars were shining clear, though the wind still howled blusteringly. And so they said good-bye; and Maggie went on through the dark to the cottage, thinking that Meenie Douglas was the most beautiful and sweet and warm-hearted companion she was ever likely to meet with through all her life, and wondering how it came about that Ronald and Mr. Murray and the rest of them had been so disgracefully neglectful in not inviting her to the New Year's festivities on the forthcoming Monday. Ronald, at least, should hear of his remissness, and that at once.

CHAPTER VII.

AN EYRIE.

"COME along, Harry, my lad," the young keeper cried next morning to his faithful terrier, "and we'll go and have a look up the hill."

He slipped a cartridge or two into his pocket, more by custom than design as it were; put his gun over his shoulder; and went out into the cold clear air, the little terrier trotting at his heels. The vague unrest of the previous evening was altogether gone now; he was his natural self again; as he strode along the road he was lightly singing—but also under his breath, lest any herd-laddie should overhear—

Roses red, roses white,
Roses in the lane,
Tell me, roses white and red,
Where is Meenie gane?

And when he got as far as the inn he found that the mail-cart had just arrived, so he turned aside to have a little gossip with the small group of shepherds and others who had come to see whether there were any newspapers or letters for them. He was a great favourite with these; perhaps also an object of envy to the younger of the lads; for he lived the life of a gentleman, one might say, and was his own master; moreover, where was there any one who looked so smart and dressed so neatly—his Glengarry cap, his deerstalking jacket, his knickerbockers, his hand-knitted socks, and white spats, and shoes, being all so trim and well cared for, even in this wild winter weather? There was some laughing and joking about the forthcoming supper-party; and more than one of them would have had him go inside with them to have "a glass," but he was proof against that temptation; while the yellow-haired Nelly, who was at work within, happening to turn her eyes to the window, and catching sight of him standing there, and being jealous of his popularity with all those shepherd-lads and gillies, suddenly said to her mistress—

"There's Ronald outside, mem, and I think he might go away and shoot something for the gentleman's dinner."

"Very well," said Mrs. Murray; "go and say that I would be very much obliged to him indeed if he would bring me a hare or two the first time he is going up the hill, but at his own convenience, to be sure."

But that was not the message that Nelly went to deliver. She wanted to show her authority before all these half-critical idlers, and also, as a good-looking lass, her independence and her mastery over men-folk.

"Ronald," said she, at the door of the inn, "I think you might just as well be going up the hill and bringing us down a hare or two, instead of standing about here doing nothing."

"Is that Highland manners, lass?" he said, but with perfect good humour. "I'm thinking ye might say 'if ye please.' But I'll get ye a hare or two, sure enough, and ye'll keep the first dance for me on Monday night."

"Indeed I am not sure that I will be at the dancing at all," retorted the pretty Nelly; but this was merely to cover her retreat—she did not wish to have any further conversation before *that lot of idle* half-grinning fellows.

As for Ronald, he bade them good-morning, and went lightly on his way again. He was going up the hill anyway; and he might as well bring down a brace of hares for Mrs. Murray; so, after walking along the road for a mile or so, he struck off across some rough and partly marshy ground, and presently began to climb the lower slopes of Clebrig, getting ever a wider and wider view as he ascended, and always when he turned finding beneath him the wind-stirred waters of the loch, where a tiny dark object, slow-moving near the shores, told him where the salmon fishers were patiently pursuing their sport.

No, there was no more unsettling notions in his brain; here he was master and monarch of all he surveyed; and if he was profoundly unconscious of the ease with which he breasted this steep hillside, at least he rejoiced in the ever-widening prospect—as lochs and hills and stretches of undulating moorland seemed to stretch ever and ever outward until, afar in the north, he could make out the Kyle of Tongue and the faint line of the sea. It was a wild and changeable day; now filled with gloom, again bursting forth into a blaze of yellow sunshine; while ever and anon some flying tag of cloud would come sweeping across the hillside and engulf him, so that all he could then discern was the rough hard heather and bits of rock around his feet. It was just as one of these transient clouds was clearing off that he was suddenly startled by a loud noise—as of iron rattling on stones; and so bewildering was this unusual noise in the intense silence reigning there that instinctively he wheeled round and lowered his gun. And then again, the next second, what he saw was about as bewildering as what he had heard—a great creature, quite close by, and yet only half visible in the clearing mist, with huge outspread wings, dragging something after it across the broken rocks. The truth flashed upon him in an instant; it was an eagle caught in a fox-trap; the strange noise was the trap striking here and there on a stone. At once he put down his gun on an exposed knoll and gave chase, with the greatest difficulty subduing the eager desire of the yelping Harry to rush forward and attack the huge bird by himself. It was a rough and ludicrous pursuit; but it ended in capture—though here, again, circumspec-

tion was necessary, for the eagle, with all his neck-feathers bristling, struck at him again and again with the talons that were free, only one foot having been caught in the trap. But the poor beast was quite exhausted; an examination of the trap showed Ronald that he must have flown with this weight attached to his leg all the way from Ben Ruach, some half dozen miles away; and now, though there was yet an occasional automatic motion of the beak or the claws, as though he would still strike for liberty, he submitted to be firmly seized while the iron teeth of the trap were being opened. And then Ronald looked at his prize (but still with a careful grip). He was a splendid specimen of the golden eagle—a bird that is only found here and there in Sutherlandshire, though the keepers are no longer allowed to kill them—and, despite himself, looking at the noble creature, he began to ask himself casuistical questions. Would not this make a handsome gift for Meenie?—he could send the bird to Macleay at Inverness, and have it stuffed and returned without anybody knowing. Moreover, the keepers were only charged to abstain from shooting such golden eagles as they might find on their own ground; and he knew from the make of the trap that this one must have come from a different shooting altogether; it was not a Clebrig eagle at all. But he looked at the fierce eye of the beast, and its undaunted mien; he knew that, if it could, it would fight to the death; and he felt a kind of pride in the creature, and admiration for it, and even a sort of sympathy and fellow-feeling.

"My good chap," said he, "I'm not going to kill you in cold blood—not me. Go back to your wife and weans, wherever they are. Off!"

And he tried to throw the big beast into the air. But this was not like flinging up a released pigeon. The eagle fell forward, and stumbled twice ere it could get its great wings into play; and then, instead of trying to soar upward, it went flapping away down wind—increasing in speed, until he could see it, now rising somewhat, cross the lower windings of Loch Naver, and make away for the northern skies.

"It's a God's mercy," he was saying to himself, as he went back *to get his gun*, "that I met the creature in the

daytime; had it been at night, I would hae thought it was the devil."

Some two or three hundred feet still farther up the hill-side he came to his own eyrie—a great mass of rock, affording shelter from either southerly or easterly winds, and surrounded with some smaller stones; and here he sate contentedly down to look around him—Harry crouched at his feet, his nose between his paws, but his eyes watchful. And this wide stretch of country between Clebrig and the northern sea would have formed a striking prospect in any kind of weather—the strange and savage loneliness of the moorlands; the solitary lakes with never a sign of habitation along their shores; the great ranges of mountains whose silent recesses are known only to the stag and the hind; but on such a morning as this it was all as unstable and unreal as it was wildly beautiful and picturesque;—for the hurrying weather made a kind of phantasmagoria of the solid land; bursts of sunlight that struck on the yellow straths were followed by swift gray cloud-wreaths blotting out the world; and again and again the white snow-peaks of the hills would melt away and become invisible, only to reappear again shining and glorious in a sky of brilliant blue; until, indeed, it seemed as if the earth had no substance and fixed foundation at all, but was a mere dream, an aerial vision, changed and moved and controlled by some unseen and capricious hand.

And then again, on the dark and wind-driven lake far below him, that small object was still to be made out—like some minute, black, crawling water insect. He took out his glass from its leather case, adjusted it, and placed it to his eye. What was this? In the world suddenly brought near—and yet dimly near, as though a film interposed—he could see that some one was standing up in the stern of the boat, and another crouching down by his side. Was that a clip or the handle of the landing-net; in other words, was it a salmon or a kelt that was fighting them there? He swept the dull waters of the loch with his glass; but could make out no splashing or springing anywhere near them. And then he could see by the curve of the rod that the fish was close at hand; there was a minute or two longer of anxiety; then a sudden movement on the

part of the crouching person—and behold a silver-white object gleams for a moment in the air and then disappears!

"Good!" he says to himself—with a kind of sigh of satisfaction as if he had himself taken part in the struggle and capture.

How peaceful looks the little hamlet of Inver-Mudal! The wild storm-clouds, and the bursts of sunlight, and the howling wind seem to sail over it unheeded; down in the hollow there surely all is quiet and still. And is Meenie singing at her work, by the window; or perhaps superintending Maggie's lessons; or gone away on one of the lonely walks that she is fond of—up by the banks of the Mudal Water? It is a bleak and a bare stream; there is scarce a bush on its banks; and yet he knows of no other river—however hung with foliage and flowers—that is so sweet and sacred and beautiful. What was it he wrote in the bygone year—one summer day when he had seen her go by—and he, too, was near the water, and could hear the soft murmuring over the pebbles? He called the idle verses

MUDAL IN JUNE.

Mudal, that comes from the lonely mere,
Silent or whispering, vanishing ever,
Know you of aught that concerns us here?—
You, youngest of all God's creatures, a river.

Born of a yesterday's summer shower,
And hurrying on with your restless motion,
Silent or whispering, every hour,
To lose yourself in the great lone ocean.

Your banks remain; but you go by,
Through day and through darkness swiftly sailing:
Say, do you hear the curlew cry,
And the snipe in the night-time hoarsely wailing?

Do you watch the wandering hinds in the morn;
Do you hear the grouse-cock crow in the heather;
Do you see the lark spring up from the corn,
All in the radiant summer weather?

O Mudal stream, how little you know
That Meenie has loved you, and loves you ever;
And while to your ocean home you flow,
She says good-bye to her well-loved river!—

O see you her now—she is coming anigh—
And the flower in her hand her aim discloses:
Laugh, Mudal, your thanks as you're hurrying by—
For she flings you a rose, in the month of roses!

Well, that was written as long ago as last midsummer; and was Meenie still as far away from him as then, and as ignorant as ever of his mute worship of her, and of these verses that he had written about her? But he indulged in no day-dreams. Meenie was as near to him as he had any right to expect—giving him of an assured and constant friendship; and as for these passing rhymes—well, he tried to make them as worthy of her as he could, though he knew she should never see them; polishing them, in so far as they might be said to have any polish at all, in honour of her; and, what is more to the point, at once cutting out and destroying any of them that seemed to savour either of affectation or of echo. No: the rude rhymes should at least be honest and of his own invention and method; imitations he could not, even in fancy, lay at Meenie's feet. And sometimes, it is true, a wild imagination would get hold of him—a whimsical thing, that he laughed at: supposing that life—the actual real life here at Inver-Mudal—were suddenly to become a play, a poem, a romantic tale; and that Meenie was to fall in love with him; and he to grow rich all at once; and the Stuarts of Glengask to be quite complaisant: why, then, would it not be a fine thing to bring all this collection of verses to Meenie, and say "There, now, it is not much; but it shows you that I have been thinking of you all through these years?" Yes, it would be a very fine thing, in a romance. But, as has been said, he was one not given to day-dreams; and he accepted the facts of life with much equanimity; and when he had written some lines about Meenie that he regarded with a little affection—as suggesting, let us say, something of the glamour of her clear Highland eyes, and the rose-sweetness of her nature, and the kindness of her heart—and when it seemed rather a pity that she should never see them—if only as a tribute to her gentleness offered by a perfectly unbiassed spectator—he quickly reminded himself that it was not his business to write verses but to trap foxes and train dogs and shoot hoodie-crows.

He was not vain of his rhymes—except where Meenie's name came in. Besides, he was a very busy person at most seasons of the year; and men, women, and children alike showed a considerable fondness for him, so that his life was full of sympathies and interests; and altogether he cannot be regarded, nor did he regard himself, as a broken-hearted or blighted being. His temperament was essentially joyous and healthy; the passing moment was enough; nothing pleased him so much as to have a grouse, or a hare, or a ptarmigan, or a startled hind appear within sure and easy range, and to say, "Well, go on. Take your life with you. Rather a pleasant day this: why shouldn't you enjoy it as well as I?"

However, on this blustering and brilliant morning he had not come all the way up hither merely to get a brace of hares for Mrs. Murray, nor yet to be a distant spectator of the salmon-fishing going on far below. Under this big rock there was a considerable cavity, and right at the back of that he had wedged in a wooden box lined with tin, and fitted with a lid and a lock. It was useful in the autumn; he generally kept in it a bottle of whisky and a few bottles of soda-water, lest any of the gentlemen should find themselves thirsty on the way home from the stalking. But on this occasion, when he got out the key and unlocked the little chest, it was not any refreshment of that kind he was after. He took out a copy-book—a cheap paper-covered thing such as is used in juvenile schools in Scotland—and turned to the first page, which was scrawled over with pencilled lines that had apparently been written in time of rain, for there were plenty of smudges there. It had become a habit of his that, when in these lonely rambles among the hills, he found some further rhymes about Meenie come into his head, he would jot them down in this copy-book, deposit it in the little chest, and probably not see them again for weeks and weeks, when, as on the present occasion, he would come with fresh eyes to see if there were any worth or value in them. Not that he took such trouble with anything else. His rhyming epistles to his friends, his praises of his terrier Harry, his songs for the Inver-Mudal lasses to sing—these things were thrown off anyhow, and had *to* take their chance. But his solitary

intercommunings away amid these alpine wastes were of a more serious cast; insensibly they gathered dignity and repose from the very silence and awfulness of the solitudes around; there was no idle and pastoral singing here about roses in the lane. He regarded the blurred lines, striving to think of them as having been written by somebody else:

Through the long sad centuries Clebrig slept,
Nor a sound the silence broke,
Till a morning in spring a strange new thing
Betrayed him and he awoke;

And he laughed, and his joyous laugh was heard
From Erribol far to Tongue;
And his granite veins deep down were stirred,
And the great old mountain grew young.

'Twas Love Meenie he saw, and she walked by the shore,
And she sang so sweet and so clear,
That the sound of her voice made him see again
The dawn of the world appear;

And at night he spake to the listening stars
And charged them a guard to keep
On the hamlet of Inver-Mudal there
And the maid in her innocent sleep,

Till the years should go by; and they should see
Love Meenie take her stand
'Mong the maidens around the footstool of God—
She gentlest of all the band!

He tore the leaf out, folded it, and put it in his pocket.

"Another one for the little bookie that's never to be seen," said he, with a kind of laugh; for indeed he treated himself to a good deal of satire, and would rather have blown his brains out than that the neighbourhood should have known he was writing these verses about Meenie Douglas.

"And hey, Harry, lad!" he called, as he locked the little cupboard again, "I'm thinking we must be picking up a hare now, if it's for soup for the gentleman's dinner the night. So ye were bauld enough to face an eagle? I doubt, if both his feet had been free, but ye might have had a lift in the air, and seen the heavens and the earth spread out below ye."

He shouldered his gun and set out again—making his way towards some rockier ground, where he very soon bagged the brace of hares he wanted. He tied their legs together, slung them over his shoulder, and began to descend the mountain again—usually keeping his eye on the minute black speck on the loch, lest there might be occasion again for his telescope.

He took the two hares—they looked remarkably like cats, by the way, for they were almost entirely white—into the inn and threw them on to the chair in the passage.

"There you are, Nelly, lass," said he, as the fair-haired Highland maid happened to go by.

"All right," said she, which was no great thanks.

But Mr. Murray, in the parlour, had heard the keeper's voice.

"Ronald," he cried, "come in for a minute, will ye?"

Mr. Murray was a little, wiry, gray-haired, good-natured looking man, who, when Ronald entered the parlour, was seated at the table, and evidently puzzling his brains over a blank sheet of paper that lay before him.

"Your sister Maggie wass here this morning," the inn-keeper said—still with his eyes fixed upon the paper—"and she wass saying that maybe Meenie—Miss Douglas—would like to come with the others on Monday night—ay, and maybe Mrs. Douglas herself too as well—but they would hef to be asked. And Kott pless me, it is not an easy thing, if you hef to write a letter, and that is more polite than asking—it is not an easy thing, I am sure. Ronald," he said, raising his eyes and turning round, "would you tek a message?"

"Where?" said Ronald—but he knew well enough, and was only seeking time to make an excuse.

"To Mrs. Douglas and the young lass; and tell them we will be glad if they will come with the others on Monday night—for the doctor is away from home, and why should they be left by themselves? Will you tek the message, Ronald?"

"How could I do that?" Ronald said. "It's you that's giving the party, Mr. Murray."

"But they know you so ferry well—and—and there will be no harm if they come and see the young lads and lasses having a reel together—ay, and a song too. And if Mrs. Douglas could *not be bothered*, it's you that could bring

the young lady—oh yes, I know ferry well—if you will ask her, she will come."

"I am sure no," Ronald said hastily, and with an embarrassment he sought in vain to conceal. "If Miss Douglas cares to come at all, it will be when you ask her. And why should ye write, man? Go down the road and ask her yourself—I mean, ask Mrs. Douglas; it's as simple as simple. What for should ye write a letter? Would ye send it through the post too? That's ceremony for next-door neighbours!"

"But, Ronald, lad, if ye should see the young lass herself——"

"No, no; take your own message, Mr. Murray; they can but give you a civil answer."

Mr. Murray was left doubting. It was clear that the awful shadow of Glengask and Orosay still dwelt over the doctor's household; and that the innkeeper was not at all sure as to what Mrs. Douglas would say to an invitation that she and her daughter Meenie—or Williamina, as the mother called her—should be present at a merry-meeting of farm-lads, keepers, gillies, and kitchen wenches.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE NEW YEAR'S FEAST.

Loud and shrill in the empty barn arose the strains of the *Athole March*, warning the young lasses to hasten with the adjustment of their ribbons, and summoning the young lads about to look sharp and escort them. The long and narrow table was prettily laid out; two candelabra instead of one shed a flood of light on the white cover; the walls were decorated with evergreens and with Meenie's resplendent paper blossoms; the peats in the improvised fireplace burned merrily. And when the company began to arrive, in twos and threes, some bashful and hesitating, others merry and jocular, there was a little embarrassment about the taking of places until Ronald laid down his pipes and set to work to arrange them. The American gentleman had brought in Mrs. Murray in state, and they were at the head of the table; while Ronald himself took the

foot, in order, as he said, to keep order—if he were able—among the lasses who had mostly congregated there. Then the general excitement and talking was hushed for a minute, while the innkeeper said grace; and then the girls—farm wenches, some of them, and Nelly, the pretty parlour-maid, and Finnuala, the cook's youngest sister, who was but lately come from Uist and talked the quaintest English, and Mr. Murray's two nieces from Tongue, and the other young lasses about the inn—all of them became demure and proper in their manner, for they were about to enjoy the unusual sensation of being waited upon.

This, of course, was Ronald's doing. There had been a question as to which of the maids were to bring in supper for so large a number; so he addressed himself to the young fellows who were standing about.

"You lazy laddies," he said, "what are ye thinking o'? Here's a chance for ye, if there's a pennyworth o' spunk among the lot o' ye. They lasses there wait on ye the whole year long, and make the beds for ye, and redd the house; I'm thinking ye might do worse than wait on them for one night, and bring in the supper when they sit down. They canna do both things; and the fun o' the night belongs to them or to nobody at all."

At first there was a little shamefaced reluctance—it was "lasses' work," they said—until a great huge Highland tyke—a Ross-shire drover who happened to be here on a visit—a man of about six feet four, with a red beard big enough for a raven to build in, declared that he would lend a hand, if no one else did; and forthwith brought his huge fist down on the bar-room table to give emphasis to his words. There was some suspicion that this unwonted gallantry was due to the fact that he had a covetous eye on Jeannie, Donald Macrae's lass, who was a very superior dairy-mistress, and was also heir-presumptive to her father's farmstead and about a score of well-favoured cattle; but that was neither here nor there; he was as good as his word; he organised the brigade, and led it; and if he swallowed a stiff glass of whisky before setting out from the kitchen for the barn, with a steaming plate of soup in each hand, that was merely to steady his nerves and enable him to face the merriment of the whole gang of those

girls. And then when this red-bearded giant of a Ganymede and his attendants had served every one, they fetched in their own plates, and sat down; and time was allowed them; for the evening was young yet, and no one in a hurry.

Now if Mr. Hodson had been rather doubtful lest his presence might produce some little restraint, he was speedily reassured, to his own great satisfaction, for he was really a most good-natured person and anxious to be friendly with everybody. In the general fun and jollity he was not even noticed; he could ask Mrs. Murray any questions he chose without suspicion of being observant; the young lady next him—who was Jeannie Macrae herself, and to whom he strove to be as gallant as might be—was very winsome and gentle and shy, and spoke in a more Highland fashion than he had heard yet; while otherwise he did not fare at all badly at this rustic feast, for there were boiled fowls and roast hares after the soup, and there was plenty of ale passed round, and tea for those who wished it. Nay, on the contrary, he had rather to push himself forward and assert himself ere he could get his proper share of the work that was going on. He insisted upon carving for at least half a dozen neighbours; he was most attentive to the pretty Highland girl next him; and laughed heartily at Mrs. Murray's Scotch stories, which he did not quite understand; and altogether entered into the spirit of the evening. But there was no doubt it was at the other end of the table that the fun was getting fast and furious; and just as little doubt that Ronald the keeper was suffering considerably at the hands of those ungrateful lasses for whom he had done so much. Like a prudent man, he held his tongue and waited his opportunity; taking their teasing with much good humour; and paying no heed to the other young fellows who were urging him to face and silence the saucy creatures. And his opportunity came in the most unexpected way. One of the girls, out of pure mischief, and without the least notion that she would be overheard, rapped lightly on the table, and said: "Mr. Ronald Strang will now favour us with a song." To her amazement and horror there was an almost instant silence; for an impression had travelled up the table that some announcement was about to be made.

"What is it now? What are you about down there?" their host called to them—and the silence, to her who had unwittingly caused it, was terrible.

But another of the girls, still bent on mischief, was bold enough to say:

"Oh, it's Ronald that's going to sing us a song."

"Sing ye a song, ye limmer, ere ye're through with your supper?" Ronald said sharply. "I'd make ye sing yourself—with a leather strap—if I had my will o' ye."

But this was not heard up the table.

"Very well, then, Ronald," the innkeeper cried, graciously. "Come away with it now. There is no one at all can touch you at that."

"Oh, do not ask him," the pretty Nelly said—apparently addressing the company, but keeping her cruel eyes on him. "Do not ask Ronald to sing. Ronald is such a shy lad."

He glanced at her; and then he seemed to make up his mind.

"Very well, then," said he, "I'll sing ye a song—and let's have a chorus, lads."

Now in Sutherlandshire, as in many other parts of the Highlands, the chief object of singing in company is to establish a chorus; and the audience, no matter whether they have heard the air or not, so soon as it begins, proceed to beat time with hand and heel, forming a kind of accompanying tramp, as it were; so that by the time the end of the first verse is reached, if they have not quite caught the tune, at least they can make some kind of rhythmic noise with the refrain. And on this occasion, if the words were new—and Ronald, on evil intent, took care to pronounce them clearly—the air was sufficiently like "Jenny dang the Weaver" for the general chorus to come in, in not more than half a dozen keys. This was what Ronald sang—and he sang it in that resonant tenor of his, and in a rollicking fashion—just as if it were an impromptu, and not a weapon that he had carefully forged long ago, and hidden away to serve some such chance as the present:

O lasses, lasses, gang your ways,
And dust the house, or wash the claes,
Ye put me in a kind o' blaze—
Ye'll break my heart among ye!

The girls rather hung their heads—the imputation that they were all setting their caps at a modest youth who wanted to have nothing to do with them was scarcely what they expected. But the lads had struck the tune somehow; and there was a roaring chorus, twice repeated, with heavy boots marking the time—

Ye'll break my heart among ye!

And then the singer proceeded—gravely—

At kirk or market, morn or e'en,
The like o' them was never seen,
For each is kind, and each a queen;—
Ye'll break my heart among ye!

And again came the roaring chorus from the delighted lads—

Ye'll break my heart among ye!

There was but one more verse—

There's that one dark, and that one fair,
And yon has wealth o' yellow hair;
Gang hame, gang hame—I can nae mair—
Ye'll break my heart among ye!

Yellow hair? The allusion was so obvious that the pretty Nelly blushed scarlet—all the more visibly because of her fair complexion; and when the thunder of the thrice-repeated refrain had ceased, she leant forward and said to him in a low voice, but with much terrible meaning—

"My lad, when I get you by yourself, I'll give it to you!"

They had nearly finished supper by this time; but ere they had the decks cleared for action, there was a formal ceremony to be gone through. The host produced his *quaich*—a small cup of horn, with a handle on each side; and likewise a bottle of whisky; and as one guest after another took hold of the quaich with the thumb and forefinger of each hand, the innkeeper filled the small cup with whisky, which had then to be drank to some more or less appropriate toast. These were in Gaelic for the most part—"*To the goodman of the inn*"; "*To the young girls that are kind, and old wives that keep a clean house*"; "*Good health; and good luck in finding things washed ashore*," and so forth

—and when it came to Mr. Hodson's turn, he would have a try at the Gaelic too.

"I think I can wrestle with it, if you give me an easy one," he remarked, as he took the quaich between his fingers and held it till it was filled.

"Oh no, sir, do not trouble about the Gaelic," said his pretty neighbour Jeannie—blushing very much, for there was comparative silence at the time.

"But I want to have my turn. If it's anything a white man can do, I can do it."

"Say *air do shlàinte*—that is, your good health," said Jeannie, blushing more furiously than ever.

He carefully balanced the cup in his hands, gravely turned towards his hostess, bowed to her, repeated the magic words with a very fair accent indeed, and drained off the whisky—amid the general applause; though none of them suspected that the swallowing of the whisky was to him a much more severe task than the pronunciation of the Gaelic. And then it came to Ronald's turn.

"Oh no, Mr. Murray," said the slim-waisted Nelly, who had recovered from her confusion, and whose eyes were now as full of mischief as ever, "do not ask Ronald to say anything in the Gaelic; he is ashamed to hear himself speak. It is six years and more he has been trying to say 'a young calf,' and he cannot do it yet."

"And besides, he's thinking of the lass he left behind in the Lothians," said her neighbour.

"And they're all black-haired girls there," continued the fair-haired Nelly. "Ronald, drink '*mo nighean dubh*.'"

He fixed his eyes on her steadily, and said: "*Tir nam beann, nan gleann, s'nan gaisgeach*;* and may all the saucy jades in Sutherland find a husband to keep them in order ere the year be out."

And now two or three of the lasses rose to clear the table; for the red-bearded drover and his brigade had not the skill to do that; and the men lit their pipes; and there was a good deal of joyous *schwärmerei*. In the midst of it all there was a rapping of spoons and knuckles at the upper end of the table; and it was clear, from the importance of his look, that Mr. Murray himself was about to favour the

* *The land of* hills and glens and heroes.

company—so that a general silence ensued. And very well indeed did the host of the evening sing—in a shrill, high-pitched voice, it is true, but still with such a multitude of small flourishes and quavers and grace notes as showed he had once been proud enough of his voice in the days gone by. "Scotland yet" he sang; and there was a universal rush at the chorus—

"And trow ye as I sing, my lads,
The burden o't shall be,
Auld Scotland's howes, and Scotland's knowes,
And Scotland's hills for me,
I'll drink a cup to Scotland yet,
Wi' a' the honours three."

And was their American friend to be excluded?—not if he knew it. He could make a noise as well as any; and he waved the quaich—which had wandered back to him—round his head; and strident enough was his voice with

"I'll drink a cup to Scotland yet,
Wi' a' the honours three."

"I feel half a Scotchman already," said he gaily to his hostess.

"Indeed, sir, I wish you were altogether one," she said in her gentle way. "I am sure I think you would look a little better in health if you lived in this country."

"But I don't look so ill, do I?" said he—rather disappointed; for he had been striving to be hilarious, and had twice drank the contents of the quaich, out of pure friendliness.

"Well, no, sir," said Mrs. Murray politely, "not more than most of them I hef seen from your country; but surely it cannot be so healthy as other places; the young ladies are so thin and delicate-looking whatever; many a one I would like to hef kept here for a while—for more friendly young ladies I never met with anywhere—just to see what the mountain air and the sweet milk would do for her."

"Well, then, Mrs. Murray, you will have the chance of trying your doctoring on my daughter when she comes up here a few weeks hence; but I think you won't find much

of the invalid about her—it's my belief she could give twenty pounds to any girl I know of in a go-as-you-please race across the stiffest ground anywhere. There's not much the matter with my Carry, if she'd only not spend the whole day in those stores in Regent Street. Well, that will be over when she comes here; I should think it'll make her stare some, if she wants to buy a veil or a pair of gloves."

But the girls at the foot of the table had been teasing Ronald to sing something; silence was forthwith procured; and presently—for he was very good natured, and sang whenever he was asked—the clear and penetrating tenor voice was ringing along the rafters·

"The news frae Moidart cam' yestreen,
*Will soon gar many ferlie,**
For ships o' war hae just come in
And landed royal Charlie."

It was a well-known song, with a resounding chorus:

"Come through the heather, around him gather,
Ye're a' the welcomer early;
Around him cling wi' a' your kin,
For wha'll be king but Charlie?"

Nay, was not this the right popular kind of song—to have two choruses instead of one?—

"Come through the heather, around him gather,
Come Ronald, and Donald, come a'thegither
And claim your rightfu' lawfu' king,
For wha'll be king but Charlie?"

This song gave great satisfaction; for they had all taken part in the chorus; and they were pleased with the melodious result. And then the lasses were at him again:

"Ronald, sing 'Doon the burn, Davie lad.'"

"Ronald, will you not give us 'Logan Water' now?"

"Ronald, 'Auld Joe Nicholson's Bonnie Nannie' or 'My Peggy is a young thing'—whichever you like best yourself."

"No, no," said the pretty Nelly, "ask him to sing 'When the kye come hame,' and he will be thinking of the black-haired lass he left in the Lothians."

* "Ferlie," wonder.

"Gae wa', gae wa'," said he, rising and shaking himself free from them. "I ken what'll put other things into your heads—or into your heels rather."

He picked up his pipes, which had been left in a corner, threw the drones over his shoulder, and marched to the upper end of the barn; then there was a preliminary groan or two, and presently the chanter broke away into a lively reel tune. The effect of this signal, as it might be called, was magical; every one at once divined what was needed; and the next moment they were all helping to get the long table separated into its component parts and carried out into the dark. There was a cross table left at the upper end, by the peat-fire, for the elderly people and the spectators to sit at, if they chose; the younger folk had wooden forms at the lower end; but the truth is that they were so eager not to have any of the inspiriting music thrown away that several sets were immediately formed, and off they went to the brisk strains of *Miss Jenny Gordon's Favourite*—intertwisting deftly, setting to partners again, fingers and thumbs snapped in the air, every lad amongst them showing off his best steps, and ringing whoops sent up to the rafters as the reel broke off again into a quick strathspey. It was wild and barbaric, no doubt; but there was a kind of rhythmic poetry in it too; Ronald grew prouder and prouder of the fire that he could infuse into this tempestuous and yet methodical crowd; the whoops became yells; and if the red-bearded drover, dancing opposite the slim-figured Nelly, would challenge her to do her best, and could himself perform some remarkable steps and shakes, well, Nelly was not ashamed to raise her gown an inch or two just to show him that he was not dancing with a flat-footed creature, but that she had swift toes and graceful ankles to compare with any. And then again they would trip off into the figure 8, swinging round with arms interlocked; and again roof and rafter would "dirl" with the triumphant shouts of the men. Then came the long wailing monition from the pipes; the sounds died down; panting and laughing and rosy-cheeked the lasses were led to the benches by their partners; and a general halt was called.

Little Maggie stole up to her brother.

"I'm going home now, Ronald," she said.

"Very well," he said. "Mind you go to bed as soon as ye get in. Good-night, lass."

"Good-night, Ronald."

She was going away, when he said to her—

"Maggie, do ye think that Miss Douglas is not coming along to see the dancing? I thought she would do that if she would rather no come to the supper."

In truth he had had his eye on the door all the time he was playing *Miss Jenny Gordon's Favourite.*

"I am sure if she stays away," the little Maggie said, "it is not her own doing. Meenie wanted to come. It is very hard that everybody should be at the party and not Meenie."

"Well, well, good-night, lass," said he; for the young folk were choosing their partners again, and the pipes were wanted. Soon there was another reel going on, as fast and furious as before.

At the end of this reel—Meenie had not appeared, by the way, and Ronald concluded that she was not to be allowed to look on at the dancing—the yellow-haired Nelly came up to the top of the room, and addressed Mrs. Murray in the Gaelic; but as she finished up with the word *quadrille*, and as she directed one modest little glance towards Mr. Hodson, that amiable but astute onlooker naturally inferred that he was somehow concerned in this speech. Mrs. Murray laughed.

"Well, sir, the girls are asking if you would not like to have a dance too; and they could have a quadrille."

"I've no cause to brag about my dancing," he said good-humouredly, "but if Miss Nelly will see me through, I dare say we'll manage somehow. Will you excuse my ignorance?"

Now the tall and slender Highland maid had not in any way bargained for this—it was merely friendliness that had prompted her proposal; but she could not well refuse; and soon one or two sets were formed; and a young lad called Munro, from Lairg, who had brought his fiddle with him for this great occasion, proceeded to tune up. The quadrille, when it came off, was performed with more of vigour than science; there was no ignominious shirking of steps—no

idle and languid walking—but a thorough and resolute flinging about, as the somewhat bewildered Mr. Hodson speedily discovered. However, he did his part gallantly, and was now grown so gay that when, at the end of the dance, he inquired of the fair Nelly whether she would like to have any little refreshment, and when she mildly suggested a little water, and offered to go for it herself, he would hear of no such thing. No, no; he went and got some soda-water, and declared that it was much more wholesome with a little whisky in it; and had some himself also. Gay and gallant?—why, certainly. He threw off thirty years of his life; he forgot that this was the young person who would be waiting at table after his daughter Carry came hither: he would have danced another quadrille with her; and felt almost jealous when a young fellow came up to claim her for the *Highland Schottische*—thus sending him back to the society of Mrs. Murray. And it was not until he had sate down that he remembered he had suggested to his daughter the training of this pretty Highland girl for the position of maid and travelling companion. But what of that? If all men were born equal, so were women; and he declared to himself that any day he would rather converse with Nelly the pretty parlour-maid than (supposing him to have the chance) with Her Illustrious Highness the Princess of Pfalzgrafweiler-Gunzenhausen.

In the meantime Ronald, his pipes not being then needed, had wandered out into the cold night-air. There were some stars visible, but they shed no great light; the world lay black enough all around. He went idly and dreamily along the road—the sounds in the barn growing fainter and fainter—until he reached the plateau where his own cottage stood. There was no light in it anywhere; doubtless Maggie had at once gone to bed, as she had been bid. And then he wandered on again—walking a little more quietly—until he reached the doctor's house. Here all the lights were out but one; there was a red glow in that solitary window; and he knew that that was Meenie's room. Surely she could not be sitting up and listening?—even the skirl of the pipes could scarcely be heard so far; and her window was closed. Reading, perhaps? He knew so many of her favourites—"The

Burial March of Dundee," "Jeannie Morrison," "Bonny Kilmeny," "Christabel," the "Hymn before Sunrise in the Valley of Chamounix," and others of a similar noble or mystical or tender kind; and perhaps, after all, these were more in consonance with the gentle dignity and rose-sweetness of her mind and nature than the gambols of a lot of farm-lads and wenches? He walked on to the bridge, and sate down there for a while, in the dark and the silence; he could hear the Mudal Water rippling by, but could see nothing. And when he passed along the road again, the light in the small red-blinded window was gone; Meenie was away in the world of dreams and phantoms—and he wondered if the people there knew who this was who had come amongst them, with her wondering eyes and sweet ways.

He went back to the barn, and resumed his pipe-playing with all his wonted vigour—waking up the whole thing, as it were; but nothing could induce him to allow one or other of the lads to be his substitute, so that he might go and choose a partner for one of the reels. He would not dance; he said his business was to keep the merry-making going. And he and they did keep it going till between five and six in the morning, when all hands were piped for the singing of "Auld Lang Syne:" and thereafter there was a general dispersal, candles going this way and that through the blackness like so many will-o'-the-wisps; and the last good-nights at length sank into silence—a silence as profound and hushed as that that lay over the unseen heights of Clebrig and the dark and still lake below.

CHAPTER IX.

ENTICEMENTS.

At about eleven o'clock on the same morning Miss Douglas was standing at the window of her own little room looking rather absently at the familiar wintry scene without, and occasionally turning to a letter that she held in her hand, and that she had apparently just then written. Presently, however, her face brightened. There was a faint sound in the distance as of some one singing; no doubt that was Ronald; he would be coming along the road with the dogs,

and if she were in any difficulty he would be the one to help. So she waited for a second or two, hoping to be able to signal him to stop; and the next minute he was in sight, walking briskly with his long and steady stride, the small terrier at his heels, the other dogs—some handsome Gordon setters, a brace of pointers, and a big brown retriever—ranging farther afield.

But why was it, she asked herself, that whenever he drew near her father's cottage he invariably ceased his singing? Elsewhere, as well she knew, he beguiled the tedium of these lonely roads with an almost constant succession of songs and snatches of songs; but here he invariably became mute. And why did he not raise his eyes to the window—where she was waiting to give him a friendly wave of the hand, or even an invitation to stop and come within doors for a minute or two? No, on he went with that long stride of his, addressing a word now and again to one or other of the dogs, and apparently thinking of nothing else. So, as there was nothing for it now but to go out and intercept him on his return, she proceeded to put on her ulster and a close-fitting deerstalker's cap; and thus fortified against the gusty north wind that was driving clouds and sunshine across the loch and along the slopes of Clebrig, she left the cottage, and followed the road that he had taken.

As it turned out, she had not far to go; for she saw that he was now seated on the parapet of the little bridge spanning the Mudal Water, and no doubt he was cutting tobacco for his pipe. When she drew near, he rose; when she drew nearer, he put his pipe in his waistcoat pocket.

"Good-morning, Ronald!" she cried, and the pretty fresh-tinted face smiled on him, and the clear gray-blue Highland eyes regarded him in the most frank and friendly way, and without any trace whatever of maiden bashfulness.

"Good-morning, Miss Douglas," said he; he was far more shy than she was.

"What a stupid thing happened this morning," said she. "When I heard that the American gentleman was going south, I wanted to tell the driver to bring the children from Crask with him as he came back in the evening; and I sent Elizabeth round to the inn to tell him that; and

then—what do you think!—they had started away half an hour before there was any need. But now I have written a letter to the Crask people, asking them to stop the waggonette as it comes back in the afternoon, and telling them that we will make the children very comfortable here for the night; and if only I could get it sent to Crask everything would be arranged. And do you think now you could get one of the young lads to take it to Crask if I gave him a shilling?"

She took out her purse, and selected a shilling from the very slender store of coins there.

"It is not much for so long a walk," she said, rather doubtfully. "Eight miles there and eight back—is it enough, do you think?"

"Oh, I'll get the letter sent for ye, Miss Douglas, easily enough," said he—and indeed he had already taken it from her hand.

Then she offered him the shilling, but with a little gesture he refused it. And then—for there flashed upon her mind a sudden suspicion that perhaps he might choose to walk all that way himself just to please her (indeed, he had done things like that before)—she became greatly embarrassed.

"Give me the letter, Ronald," said she, "and I will find some one myself. You are going away now with the dogs."

"Oh no," said he, "I will see that the Crask folk get your message."

"And the money to pay the lad?" said she timidly.

"Dinna bother your head wi' that," he answered. "There's enough money scattered about the place just now—the American gentleman was free-handed this morning. Ay, and there's something I've got for you."

"For me?" she said, with her eyes opening somewhat.

"Well," said he (and very glad he was to have the letter safe and sound in his possession), "I was telling him about the children's party to-morrow night; and he's a friendly kind o' man, that; he said he would like to have been at it, if he could have stayed; and I'm sure he would have got on wi' them well enough, for he's a friendly kind of man, as I say. Well, then, I couldna tell him the exact number o' the bairns; but no matter what number, each

one o' them is to find sevenpence under the teacup—that's a penny for each fish he got. Ay, he's a shrewd-headed fellow, too; for says he 'I suppose, now, the old people will be for having the children save up the sixpence, so at least they'll have the penny to spend;' and he was curious even to find out where the bairns in a place like this got their toys, or if sweeties ever came their way. 'It's little enough of either o' them,' I said to him, 'they see, except when Miss Douglas has been to Lairg or Tongue;' and he was very anxious to make your acquaintance, I may tell ye, but he said he would wait till his daughter came with him the next time. I'm thinking the bairns will be pleased to find a little packet of money in the saucers; and it's not too much for a man to pay for the luck o' getting seven salmon in the middle of January—for who could have expected that?"

And then Meenie laughed.

"It's little you know, Ronald, what is in store for you to-morrow night. It will be the hardest night's work you ever undertook in your life."

"I'm not afraid o't," he answered simply.

"But you do not know yet."

She opened her ulster and from an inside pocket produced the formidable document that she had shown to Ronald's sister; and then she buttoned the long garment again, and contentedly sate herself down on the low stone parapet, the programme in her hand. And now all trace of embarrassment was fled from her; and when she spoke to him, or smiled, those clear frank eyes of hers looked straight into his, fearing nothing, but only expecting a welcome. She did not, as he did, continually remember that she was Miss Douglas, the doctor's daughter, and he merely a smart young deerstalker. To her he was simply Ronald—the Ronald that every one knew and liked; who had a kind of masterful way throughout this neighbourhood, and was arbiter in all matters of public concern; but who, nevertheless, was of such amazing good nature that there was no trouble he would not undertake to gratify her slightest wish. And as he was so friendly and obliging towards her, she made no doubt he was so to others; and that would account for his great popularity, she considered;

and she thought it was very lucky for this remote little hamlet that it held within it one who was capable of producing so much good feeling, and keeping the social atmosphere sweet and sound.

As for him, he met this perfect friendship of hers with a studied respect. Always, if it was on the one side "Ronald," on the other it was "Miss Douglas." Why, her very costume was a bar to more familiar relations. At this moment, as she sate on the stone parapet of the bridge, looking down at the document before her, and as he stood at a little distance, timidly awaiting what she had to say, it occurred to him again, as it had occurred before, that no matter what dress it was, each one seemed to become her better than any other. What was there particular in a tight-fitting gray ulster and a deerstalker's cap? and yet there was grace there, and style, and a nameless charm. If one of the lasses at the inn, now, were sent on an errand on one of these wild and blustering mornings, and got her hair blown about, she came back looking untidy; but if Miss Douglas had her hair blown about, so that bits and curls of it got free from the cap or the velvet hat, and hung lightly about her forehead or her ears or her neck, it was a greater witchery than ever. Then everything seemed to fit her so well and so easily, and to be so simple; and always leaving her—however it was so managed—perfect freedom of movement, so that she could swing a child on to her shoulder, or run after a truant, or leap from bank to bank of a burn without disturbing in the least that constant symmetry and neatness. To Ronald it was all a wonder; and there was a still further wonder always seeming to accompany her and surround her. Why was it that the bleakest winter day, on these desolate Sutherland moors, suddenly grew filled with light when he chanced to see a well-known figure away along the road—the world changing into a joyful thing, as if the summer were already come, and the larks singing in the blue? And when she spoke to him, there was a kind of music in the air; and when she laughed—why, Clebrig and Ben Loyal and the whispering Mudal Water seemed all to be listening and all to be glad that she was happy and pleased. She was the only one, other than himself, that the faithful Harry would follow; and he would go with

her wherever she went, so long as she gave him an occasional word of encouragement.

"Will I read you the programme, Ronald?" said she, with just a trace of mischief in the gray-blue eyes. "I'm sure you ought to hear what has to be done, for you are to be in the chair, you know."

"Me?" said he, in astonishment. "I never tried such a thing in my life."

"Oh yes," she said cheerfully. "They tell me you are always at the head of the merry-makings: and is not this a simple thing? And besides, I do not want any other grown people—I do not want Mr. Murray—he it a very nice man—but he would be making jokes for the grown-up people all the time. I want nobody but you and Maggie and myself besides the children, and we will manage it very well, I am sure."

There was a touch of flattery in the proposal.

"Indeed, yes," said he at once. "We will manage well enough, if ye wish it that way."

"Very well, then," said she, turning with a practical air to the programme. "We begin with singing Old Hundred, and then the children will have tea and cake—and the sixpence and the penny. And then there is to be an address by the Chairman—that's you, Ronald."

"Bless me, lassie!" he was startled into saying; and then he stammered an apology, and sought safety in a vehement protest against the fancy that he could make a speech—about anything whatever.

"Well, that is strange," said Meenie looking at him, and rather inclined to laugh at his perplexity. "It is a strange thing if you cannot make a little speech to them; for I have to make one—at the end. See, there is my name."

He scarcely glanced at the programme.

"And what have you to speak about, Miss Douglas?"

She laughed.

"About you."

"About me?" he said, rather aghast.

"It is a vote of thanks to the Chairman—and easy enough it will be, I am sure. For I have only to say about you what I hear every one say about you; and that will be simple enough."

The open sincerity of her friendship—and even of her marked liking for him—was so apparent that for a second or so he was rather bewildered. But he was not the kind of man to misconstrue frankness; he knew that was part of herself; she was too generous, too much inclined to think well of everybody; and the main point to which he had to confine himself was this, that if she, out of her good-nature, could address a few words to those children—about him or any other creature or object in the world—it certainly behoved him to do his best also, although he had never tried anything of the kind before. And then a sudden fancy struck him; and his eyes brightened eagerly.

"Oh yes, yes," he said, "I will find something to say. I would make a bad hand at a sermon; but the bairns have enough o' that at times; I dare say we'll find something for them o' another kind—and they'll no be sorry if it's short. I'm thinking I can find something that'll please them."

And what was this that was in his head?—what but the toast of the Mistress of the Feast! If Meenie had but known, she would doubtless have protested against the introduction of any mutual admiration society into the modest hamlet of Inver-Mudal; but at that moment she was still scanning the programme.

"Now you know, Ronald," she said, "it is to be all quiet and private; and that is why the grown-up people are to be kept out except ourselves. Well, then, after they have had raisins handed round, you are to sing 'My love she's but a lassie yet'—that is a compliment to the little ones; and then I will read them something; and then you are to sing 'O dinna cross the burn, Willie'—I have put down no songs that I have not heard you sing. And then if you would play them 'Lord Breadalbane's March' on the pipes——"

She looked up again, with an air of apology.

"Do you think I am asking too much from you, Ronald?" she said.

"Indeed not a bit," said he promptly. "I will play or sing for them all the night long, if you want; and I'm sure it's much better we should do it all ourselves, instead o' having a lot o' *grown-up* folk to make the bairns shy."

"It is not the Chairman anyway that will make them shy—if what they say themselves is true," said Meenie very prettily; and she folded up her programme and put it in her pocket again.

She rose; and he whistled in the dogs, as if he would return to the village.

"I thought you were taking them for a run," said she.

"Oh, they have been scampering about; I will go back now."

Nor did it occur to her for a moment that she would rather not walk back to the door of her mother's house with him. On the contrary, if she had been able to attract his notice when he passed, she would have gone down to the little garden-gate, and had this conversation with him in view of all the windows. If she wanted him to do anything for her, she never thought twice about going along to his cottage and knocking at the door; or she would, in the event of his not being there, go on to the inn and ask if any one had seen Ronald about. And so on this occasion she went along the road with him in much good-humour; praising the dogs, hoping the weather would continue fine, and altogether in high spirits over her plans for the morrow.

However, they were not to part quite so pleasantly. At the small garden-gate, and evidently awaiting them, stood Mrs. Douglas; and Ronald guessed that she was in no very good temper. In truth, she seldom was. She was a doll-like little woman, rather pretty, with cold clear blue eyes, fresh-coloured cheeks, and quite silver-white hair, which was carefully curled and braided—a pretty little old lady, and one to be petted and made much of, if only she had had a little more amiability of disposition. But she was a disappointed woman. Her big good-natured husband had never fulfilled the promise of his early years, when, in a fit of romance, she married the penniless medical student whom she had met in Edinburgh. He was not disappointed at all; his life suited him well enough; he was excessively fond of his daughter Meenie, and wanted no other companion when she was about; after the hard work of making a round of professional visits in that wild district, the quiet and comfort and neatness of the little cottage at

Inver-Mudal were all that he required. But it was far otherwise with the once ambitious little woman whom he had married. The shadow of the dignity of the Stuarts of Glengask still dwelt over her; and it vexed her that she had nothing with which to overawe the neighbours or to convince the passing stranger of her importance. Perhaps if she had been of commanding figure, that might have helped her, however poor her circumstances might be; as it was, being but five feet two inches in height—and rather toy-like withal—everything seemed against her. It was but little use her endeavouring to assume a majestic manner when her appearance was somehow suggestive of a glass case; and the sharpness of her tongue, which was considerable, seemed to be but little heeded even in her own house, for both her husband and her daughter were persons of an easy good humour, and rather inclined to pet her in spite of herself.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Douglas," Ronald said respectfully, and he raised his cap as they drew near.

"Good-morning, Mr. Strang," she said, with much precision, and scarcely glancing at him.

She turned to Meenie.

"Williamina, how often have I told you to shut the gate after you when you go out?" she said sharply. "Here has the cow been in again."

"It cannot do much harm at this time of the year," Meenie said lightly.

"I suppose if I ask you to shut the gate that is enough? Where have you been? Idling, I suppose. Have you written to Lady Stuart to thank her for the Birthday Book?"

It seemed to Ronald (who wished to get away, but could scarcely leave without some civil word of parting) that she referred to Lady Stuart in an unmistakably clear tone. She appeared to take no notice of Ronald's presence, but she allowed him to hear that there was such a person as Lady Stuart in existence.

"Why, mother, it only came yesterday, and I haven't looked over it yet," Meenie said.

"I think when her ladyship sends you a present," observed the little woman, with severe dignity, "the least you can do is to write and thank her at once. There are many

who would be glad of the chance. Go in and write the letter now."

"Very well, mother," said Meenie, with perfect equanimity; and then she called "Good-morning, Ronald!" and went indoors.

What was he to do to pacify this imperious little dame? As a gamekeeper, he knew but the one way.

"Would a hare or two, or a brace of ptarmigan be of any use to you, Mrs. Douglas?" said he.

"Indeed," she answered, with much dignity, "we have not had much game of any kind of late, for at Glengask they do not shoot any of the deer after Christmas."

This intimation that her cousin, Sir Alexander, was the owner of a deer-forest might have succeeded with anybody else. But alas! this young man was a keeper, and very well he knew that there was no forest at all at Glengask, though occasionally in October they might come across a stag that had been driven forth from the herd, or they might find two or three strayed hinds in the woods later on; while, if Mrs. Douglas had but even one haunch sent her in the year—say at Christmas—he considered she got a very fair share of whatever venison was going at Glengask. But of course he said nothing of all this.

"Oh, very well," said he, "I'm thinking o' getting two or three o' the lads to go up the hill for a hare-drive one o' these days. The hares 'll be the better o' some thinning down—on one or two o' the far tops; and then again, when we've got them it's no use sending them south—they're no worth the carriage. So if ye will take a few o' them, I'm sure you're very welcome. Good-morning, ma'am."

"Good-morning," said she, a little stiffly, and she turned and walked towards the cottage.

As for him, he strode homeward with right goodwill; for Meenie's letter was in his pocket; and he had forthwith to make his way to Crask—preferring not to place any commission of hers in alien hands. He got the dogs kennelled up—all except the little terrier; he slung his telescope over his shoulder, and took a stick in his hand. "Come along, Harry, lad, ye'll see your friends at Crask ere dinner time, and if ye're well-behaved ye'll come home in the waggonette along wi' the bairns."

It was a brisk and breezy morning; the keen north wind was fortunately behind him; and soon he was swinging along through the desolate solitudes of Strath Terry, his footfall on the road the only sound in the universal stillness. And yet not the only sound, for sometimes he conversed with Harry, and sometimes he sent his clear tenor voice ringing over the wide moorland, and startling here or there a sheep, the solitary occupant of these wilds. For no longer had he to propitiate that domineering little dame; and the awful shadow of Glengask was as nothing to him; the American, with his unsettling notions, had departed; here he was at home, his own master, free in mind, and with the best of all companions trotting placidly at his heels. No wonder his voice rang loud and clear and contented:—

"'Tis not beneath the burgonet,
Nor yet beneath the crown,
'Tis not on couch of velvet,
Nor yet on bed of down.

Harry, lad, do ye see that hoodie? Was there ever such impudence? I could maist kill him with a stone. But I'll come along and pay a visit to the gentleman ere the month's much older:—

"'Tis beneath the spreading birch,
In the dell without a name,
Wi' a bonnie, bonnie lassie,
When the kye come hame.

What think ye o' that now?—for we'll have to do our best to-morrow night to please the bairns. Ah, you wise wee deevil!—catch you drinking out o' a puddle when ye see any running water near.

"When the kye come hame, when the kye come hame,
'Twixt the gloaming and the mirk, when the kye come hame."

CHAPTER X.

HIGH FESTIVAL.

A CHILDREN'S tea-party in a Highland barn sounds a trivial sort of affair; and, as a spectacle, would doubtless suffer in contrast with a fancy-dress ball in Kensington or with a State concert at Buckingham Palace. But human nature is the important thing, after all, no matter what the surroundings may be; and if one considers what the ordinary life of these children was—the dull monotony of it in those far and bleak solitudes; their ignorance of pantomime transformation scenes; their lack of elaborately illustrated fairy tales, and similar aids to the imagination enjoyed by more fortunate young people elsewhere—it was surely an interesting kind of project to bring these bairns away from the homely farm or the keeper's cottage, in the depth of mid-winter, and to march them through the blackness of a January evening into a suddenly opening wonderland of splendour and colour and festivity. They were not likely to remember that this was but a barn—this beautiful place, with its blazing candelabra, and its devices of evergreens and great white and red roses, and the long table sumptuously set forth, and each guest sitting down, finding himself or herself a capitalist to the extent of sevenpence. And so warm and comfortable the lofty building was; and so brilliant and luminous with those circles of candles; and the loud strains of the pipes echoing through it—giving them a welcome just as if they were grown-up people: no wonder they stared mostly in silence at first, and seemed awestruck, and perhaps were in doubt whether this might not be some Cinderella kind of feast, that they might suddenly be snatched away from—and sent back again through the cold and the night to the far and silent cottage in the glen. But this feeling soon wore off; for it was no mystical fairy—though she seemed more beautiful and gracious, and more richly attired than any fairy they had ever dreamed about—who went swiftly here and there and everywhere, arranging their seats for them, laughing and talking with them, forgetting not one of their names, and

as busy and merry and high-spirited as so great an occasion obviously demanded.

Moreover, is it not in these early years that ideals are unconsciously being formed—from such experiences as are nearest ?—ideals that in after-life may become standards of conduct and aims. They had never seen any one so gentle-mannered as this young lady who was at once their hostess and the little mother of them all, nor any one so dignified and yet so simple and good-humoured and kind. They could not but observe with what marked respect Ronald Strang (a most important person in their eyes) treated her—insisting on her changing places with him, lest she should be in a draught when the door was opened; and not allowing her to touch the teapots that came hot and hot from the kitchen, lest she should burn her fingers; he pouring out the tea himself, and rather clumsily too. And if their ideal of sweet and gracious womanhood (supposing it to be forming in their heads) was of but a prospective advantage, was there not something of a more immediate value to them in thus being allowed to look on one who was so far superior to the ordinary human creatures they saw around them ? She formed an easy key to the few imaginative stories they were familiar with. Cinderella, for example : when they read how she fascinated the prince at the ball, and won all hearts and charmed all eyes, they could think of Miss Douglas, and eagerly understand. The Queen of Sheba, when she came in all her splendour : how were these shepherds' and keepers' and crofters' children to form any notion of her appearance but by regarding Miss Douglas in this beautiful and graceful attire of hers ? In point of fact, her gown was but of plain black silk ; but there was something about the manner of her wearing it that had an indefinable charm ; and then she had a singularly neat collar and a pretty ribbon round her neck ; and there were slender silver things gleaming at her wrists from time to time. Indeed, there was no saying for how many heroines of history or fiction Miss Meenie Douglas had unconsciously to herself to do duty—in the solitary communings of a summer day's herding, or during the dreary hours in which these hapless little people were shut up in some small, close, overcrowded parish church, supposing

that they lived anywhere within half a dozen miles of such a building: now she would be Joan of Arc, or perhaps Queen Esther that was so surpassing beautiful, or Lord Ullin's daughter that was drowned within sight of Ulva's shores. And was it not sufficiently strange that the same magical creature, who represented to them everything that was noble and beautiful and refined and queen-like, should now be moving about amongst them, cutting cake for them, laughing, joking, patting this one or that on the shoulder, and apparently quite delighted to wait on them and serve them?

The introductory singing of the Old Hundredth Psalm was, it must be confessed, a failure. The large majority of the children present had never either heard or seen a piano; and when Meenie went to that strange-looking instrument (it had been brought over from her mother's cottage with considerable difficulty), and when she sate down and struck the first deep resounding chords—and when Ronald, at his end of the table, led off the singing with his powerful tenor voice—they were far too much interested and awe-struck to follow. Meenie sang, in her quiet clear way, and Maggie timidly joined in, but the children were silent. However, as has already been said, the restraint that was at first pretty obvious very soon wore off; the tea and cake were consumed amid much general hilarity and satisfaction; and when in due course the Chairman rose to deliver his address, and when Miss Douglas tapped on the table to secure attention, and also by way of applause, several of the elder ones had quite enough courage and knowledge of affairs to follow her example, so that the speaker may be said to have been received with favour.

And if there were any wise ones there, whose experience had taught them that tea and cake were but a snare to entrap innocent people into being lectured and sermonised, they were speedily reassured. The Chairman's address was mostly about starlings and jays and rabbits and ferrets and squirrels; and about the various ways of taming these, and teaching them; and of his own various successes and failures when he was a boy. He had to apologise at the outset for not speaking in the Gaelic; for he said that if he tried they would soon be laughing at him; he would have

to speak in English; but if he mentioned any bird or beast whose name they did not understand, they were to ask him, and he would tell them the Gaelic name. And very soon it was clear enough that this was no lecture on the wanderings of the children of Israel, nor yet a sermon on justification by faith; the eager eyes of the boys followed every detail of the capture of the nest of young ospreys; the girls were like to cry over the untimely fate of a certain tame sparrow that had strayed within the reach—or the spring rather—of an alien cat; and general laughter greeted the history of the continued and uncalled-for mischiefs and evil deeds of one Peter, a squirrel but half reclaimed from its savage ways, that had cost the youthful naturalist much anxiety and vexation, and also not a little blood. There was, moreover, a dark and wild story of revenge—on an ill-conditioned cur that was the terror of the whole village, and was for ever snapping at girls' ankles and boys' legs—a most improper and immoral story to be told to young folks, though the boys seemed to think the ill-tempered beast got no more than it deserved. That small village, by the way, down there in the Lothians, seemed to have been a very remarkable place; the scene of the strangest exploits and performances on the part of terriers, donkeys, pet kittens, and tame jackdaws; haunted by curious folk, too, who knew all about bogles and kelpies and such uncanny creatures, and had had the most remarkable experiences of them (though modern science was allowed to come in here for a little bit, with its cold-blooded explanations of the supernatural). And when, to finish up this discursive and apparently aimless address, he remarked that the only thing lacking in that village where he had been brought up, and where he had observed all these incidents and wonders, was the presence of a kind-hearted and generous young lady, who, on an occasion, would undertake all the trouble of gathering together the children for miles around, and would do everything she could to make them perfectly happy, they knew perfectly well whom he meant; and when he said, in conclusion, that if they knew of any such an one about here, in Inver-Mudal, and if they thought that she had been kind to them, and if they wished to show her that they were grateful to her for her goodness, they could not

do better than give her three loud cheers, the lecture came to an end in a perfect storm of applause; and Meenie—blushing a little, and yet laughing—had to get up and say that she was responsible for the keeping of order by this assembly, and would allow no speech-making and no cheering that was not put down in the programme.

After this there was a service of raisins; and in the general quiet that followed Mr. Murray came into the room, just to see how things were going on. Now the innkeeper considered himself to be a man of a humorous turn; and when he went up to shake hands with Miss Douglas, and looked down the long table, and saw Ronald presiding at the other end, and her presiding at this, and all the children sitting so sedately there, he remarked to her in his waggish way—

"Well, now, for a young married couple, you have a very large family."

But Miss Douglas was not a self-conscious young person, nor easily alarmed, and she merely laughed and said—

"I am sure they are a very well-behaved family indeed."

But Ronald, who had not heard the jocose remark, by the way, objected to any one coming in to claim Miss Douglas's attention on so important an occasion; and in his capacity of Chairman he rose and rapped loudly on the table.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "we're not going to have any idlers here the night. Any one that bides with us must do something. I call on Mr. Murray to sing his well-known song, 'Bonnie Peggie, O.'"

"Indeed no, indeed no," the innkeeper said, instantly retreating to the door. "There iss too many good judges here the night. I'll leave you to yourselfs; but if there's anything in the inn you would like sent over, do not be afraid to ask for it, Ronald. And the rooms for the children are all ready, and the beds; and we'll make them very comfortable, Miss Douglas, be sure of that now."

"It's ower soon to talk about beds yet," Ronald said, when the innkeeper had gone; and he drove home the wooden bolt of the door, so that no other interloper should get in. Meenie had said she wanted no outsiders present; that was enough.

And then they set about getting through the programme —the details of which need not be repeated here. Song followed song; when there was any pause Meenie played simple airs on the piano; for "The Cameronian's Dream," when it came to her turn to read them something, she substituted "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," which was listened to with breathless interest. Even the little Maggie did her part in the "Huntingtower" duet very creditably—fortified by the knowledge that there were no critics present. And as for the children, they had become quite convinced that there was to be no sermon; and that they were not to be catechised about their lessons, nor examined as to the reasons annexed to the Fourth Commandment; all care was gone from them; for the moment life was nothing but shortbread and raisins and singing, with admiration of Miss Douglas's beautiful hair and beautiful kind eyes and soft and laughing voice.

And then, as the evening wore on, it became time to send these young people to the beds that had been prepared for them at the inn; and of course they could not break up without singing "Auld Lang Syne"—Meenie officiating at the piano, and all the others standing up and joining hands. And then she had to come back to the table to propose a vote of thanks to the Chairman. Well, she was not much abashed. Perhaps there was a little extra colour in her face at the beginning; and she said she had never tried to make a speech before; and, indeed, that now there was no occasion, for that all of them knew Ronald (so she called him, quite naturally), and knew that he was always willing to do a kindness when he was asked. And she said that he had done a great deal more than had been originally begged of him; and they ought all of them, including herself, to be very grateful to him; and if they wished to give him a unanimous vote of thanks, they were all to hold up their right hand—as she did. So that vote was carried; and Ronald said a few words in reply—mostly about Miss Douglas, in truth, and also telling them to whom they were indebted for the money found in each saucer. Then came the business of finding wraps for them and muffling them up ere they went out into the January night (though many a *one there* was all unused to such precau-

tions, and wondered that Miss Douglas should be so careful of them), while Ronald, up at the head of the room, was playing them a parting salute on the pipes—*Caidil gu lo* it was, which means "Sleep on till day." Finally, when Maggie and Meenie were ushering their small charges through the darkness to the back-door of the inn, he found himself alone; and, before putting out the candles and fastening up, he thought he might as well have a smoke—for that solace had been denied him during the long evening.

Well, he was staring absently into the mass of smouldering peats, and thinking mostly of the sound of Meenie's voice as he had heard it when she sang with the children "Whither, pilgrims, are you going?" when he heard footsteps behind him, and turning found that both Meenie and Maggie had come back.

"Ronald," said Meenie, with her pretty eyes smiling at him, "do you know that Maggie and I are rather tired——"

"Well, I dinna wonder," said he.

"Yes, and both of us very hungry too. And I am sure there will be no supper waiting for either Maggie or me when we go home; and do you think you could get us some little thing now?"

"Here?" said he, with his face lighting up with pleasure: were those three to have supper all by themselves?

"Oh yes," said she, in her friendly way. "I am not sure that my mother would like me to stay at the inn for supper; but this is our own place; and the table laid; and Maggie and I would rather be here, I am sure. And you—are you not hungry too—after so long a time—I am sure you want something besides raisins and shortbread. But if it will be any trouble——"

"Trouble or no trouble," said he quickly, "has nothing to do wi't. Here, Maggie, lass, clear the end of the table; and we'll soon get some supper for ye."

And away he went to the inn, summoning the lasses there, and driving and hurrying them until they had arranged upon a large tray a very presentable supper—some cold beef, and ham, and cheese, and bread, and ale; and when the fair-haired Nelly was ready to start forth with this burden, he lit a candle and walked before her through the darkness, lest she should miss her footing. And very

demure was Nelly when she placed this supper on the table; there was not even a look for the smart young keeper; and when Meenie said to her—

"I hear, Nelly, you had great goings-on on Monday night"—she only answered—"Oh yes, miss, there was that"—and could not be drawn into conversation, but left the moment she had everything arranged.

But curiously enough, when the two girls had taken their seats at this little cross table, Ronald remained standing—just behind them, indeed, as if he were a waiter. And would Miss Douglas have this? and would Miss Douglas have that? he suggested—mostly to cloak his shamefacedness; for indeed that first wild assumption that they were all to have supper together was banished now as an impertinence. He would wait on them, and gladly; but—but his own supper would come after.

"And what will you have yourself, Ronald?" Meenie asked.

"Oh," said he, "that will do by and by. I am not so hungry as you."

"Did you have so much of the shortbread?" said she, laughing.

He went and stirred up the peats—and the red glow sent a genial warmth across towards them.

"Come, Ronald," said the little Maggie, "and have some supper."

"There is no hurry," he said evasively. "I think I will go outside and have a pipe now; and get something by and by."

"I am sure," said Meenie saucily, "that it is no compliment to us that you would rather go away and smoke. See, now, if we cannot tempt you."

And therewith, with her own pretty fingers, she made ready his place at the table; and put the knife and fork properly beside the plate; and helped him to a slice of beef and a slice of ham; and poured some ale into his tumbler. Not only that, but she made a little movement of arranging her dress which was so obviously an invitation that he should there and then take a place by her, that it was not in mortal man to resist; though, indeed, after sitting down, he seemed to devote all his attention to looking after his

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companions. And very soon any small embarrassment was entirely gone; Meenie was in an unusually gay and merry mood—for she was pleased that her party had been so obviously a success, and all her responsibilities over. And this vivacity gave a new beauty to her face; her eyes seemed more kind than ever; when she laughed, it was a sweet low laugh, like the cooing of pigeons on a summer afternoon.

"And what are you thinking of, Maggie?" she said, suddenly turning to the little girl, who had grown rather silent amid this talking and joking.

"I was wishing this could go on for ever," was the simple answer.

"What? A perpetual supper? Oh, you greedy girl! Why, you must be looking forward to the Scandinavian heaven——"

"No, it's to be with Ronald and you, Meenie dear—just like now—for you seem to be able to keep everybody happy."

Miss Douglas did blush a little at this; but it was an honest compliment, and it was soon forgotten. And then, when they had finished supper, she said—

"Ronald, do you know that I have never played an accompaniment to one of your songs? Would you not like to hear how it sounds?"

"But—but I'm not used to it—I should be putting you wrong——"

"No, no; I'm sure we will manage. Come along," she said briskly. "There is that one I heard you sing the other day—I heard you, though you did not see me—'Gae bring to me a pint o' wine, and fill it in a silver tassie; that I may drink, before I go, a service to my bonnie lassie'—and very proud she was, I suppose. Well, now, we will try that one."

So they went to the other end of the barn, where the piano was; and there was a good deal of singing there, and laughing and joking—among this little party of three. And Meenie sang too—on condition (woman-like) that Ronald would light his pipe. Little Maggie scarcely knew which to admire the more—this beautiful and graceful young lady, who was so complaisant and friendly and kind,

or her own brother, who was so handsome and manly and modest, and yet could do everything in the world. Nor could there have been any sinister doubt in that wish of hers that these three should always be together as they were then; how was she to know that this was the last evening on which Meenie Douglas and Ronald were to meet on these all too friendly terms?

CHAPTER XI.

A REVELATION.

EARLY the next morning, when as yet the sunrise was still widening up and over the loch, and the faint tinge of red had not quite left the higher slopes of Clebrig, Ronald had already finished his breakfast, and was in his own small room, smoking the customary pipe, and idly—and with some curious kind of whimsical amusement in his brain—turning over the loose sheets of scribbled verses. And that was a very ethereal and imaginary Meenie he found there—a Meenie of lonely hillside wanderings—a Meenie of day-dreams and visions: not the actual, light-hearted, shrewd-headed Meenie of the evening before, who was so merry after the children had gone, and so content with the little supper-party of three, and would have him smoke his pipe without regard to her pretty silk dress. This Meenie on paper was rather a wistful, visionary, distant creature; whereas the Meenie of the previous evening was altogether good-humoured and laughing, with the quaintest mother-ways in the management of the children, and always a light of kindness shining in her clear Highland eyes. He would have to write something to portray Meenie (to himself) in this more friendly and actual character. He could do it easily enough, he knew. There never was any lack of rhymes when Meenie was the occasion. At other things he had to labour—frequently, indeed, until, reflecting that this was not his business, he would fling the scrawl into the fire, and drive it into the peats with his heel, and go away with much content. But when Meenie was in his head, everything came readily enough; all the world around seemed full of beautiful things to compare with her; the birds were singing

of her ; the mountains were there to guard her ; the burn, as it whispered through the rushes, or danced over the open bed of pebbles, had but the one continual murmur of Meenie's name. Verses ? he could have written them by the score—and laughed at them, and burned them, too.

Suddenly the little Maggie appeared.

" Ronald," she said, " the Doctor's come home."

" What—at this time in the morning ? " he said turning to her.

" Yes, I am sure ; for I can see the dog-cart at the door of the inn."

" Well now," said he, hastily snatching up his cap, " that is a stroke of luck—if he will come with us. I will go and meet him."

But he need not have hurried so much ; the dog-cart was still at the door of the inn when he went out ; and indeed remained there as he made his way along the road. The Doctor, who was a most sociable person, had stopped for a moment to hear the news ; but Mr. Murray happened to be there, and so the chat was a protracted one. In the meantime Ronald's long swinging stride soon brought him into their neighbourhood.

" Good-morning, Doctor ! " he cried.

" Good-morning, Ronald," said the other, turning round. He was a big man, somewhat corpulent, with an honest, wholesome, ruddy face, soft brown eyes, and an expressive mouth, that could temper his very apparent good-nature with a little mild sarcasm.

" You've come back in the nick of time," the keeper said—for well he knew the Doctor's keen love of a gun. " I'm thinking of driving some of the far tops the day, to thin down the hares a bit ; and I'm sure ye'd be glad to lend us a hand."

" Man, I was going home to my bed, to tell ye the truth," said the Doctor ; " it's very little sleep I've had the last ten days."

" What is the use of that ? " said Ronald, " there's aye plenty o' time for sleep in the winter."

And then the heavy-framed occupant of the dog-cart glanced up at the far-reaching heights of Clebrig, and there was a grim smile on his mouth.

"It's all very well," said he, "for herring-stomached young fellows like you to face a hill like that; but I've got weight to carry, man; and——"

"Come, come, Doctor; it's not the first time you've been on Clebrig," Ronald said—he could see that Meenie's father wanted to be persuaded. "Besides, we'll no try the highest tops up there—there's been too much snow. And I'll tell ye how we'll make it easy for ye; we'll row ye down the loch and begin at the other end and work home—there, it's a fair offer."

It was an offer, at all events, that the big doctor could not withstand.

"Well, well," said he, "I'll just drive the dog-cart along and see how they are at home; and then if the wife let's me out o' her clutches, I'll come down to the loch side as fast as I can."

Ronald turned to one of the stable-lads (all of whom were transformed into beaters on this occasion).

"Jimmy, just run over to the house and fetch my gun; and bid Maggie put twenty cartridges—number 4, she knows where they are—into the bag; and then ye can take the gun and the cartridge-bag down to the boat—and be giving her a bale-out till I come along. I'm going to the farm now, to get two more lads if I can; tell the Doctor I'll no be long after him, if he gets down to the loch first."

Some quarter of an hour thereafter they set forth; and a rough pull it was down the loch, for the wind was blowing hard, and the waves were coming broadside on. Those who were at the oars had decidedly the best of it, for it was bitterly cold; but even the others did not seem to mind much—they were chiefly occupied in scanning the sky-line of the hills (a habit that one naturally falls into in a deer country), while Ronald and the Doctor, seated in the stern, were mostly concerned about keeping their guns dry. In due course of time they landed, made their way through a wood of young birch-trees, followed the channel of a burn for a space, and by and by began to reach the upper slopes, where the plans for the first drive were carefully drawn out and explained.

Now it is unnecessary to enter into details of the day's

achievements, for they were neither exciting nor difficult nor daring. It was clearly a case of shooting for the pot; although Ronald, in his capacity of keeper, was anxious to have the hares thinned down, knowing well enough that the over-multiplying of them was as certain to bring in disease as the overstocking of a mountain farm with sheep. But it may be said that the sport, such as it was, was done in a workmanlike manner. In Ronald's case, each cartridge meant a hare—and no praise to him, for it was his business. As for the Doctor, he was not only an excellent shot, but he exercised a wise and humane discretion as well. Nothing would induce him to fire at long range on the off-chance of hitting; and this is all the more laudable in the shooting of mountain hares, for these, when wounded, will frequently dodge into a hole among the rocks, like a rabbit, baffling dogs and men, and dying a miserable death. Moreover, there was no need to take risky shots. The two guns were posted behind a stone or small hillock—lying at full length on the ground, only their brown-capped heads and the long barrels being visible. Then the faint cries in the distance became somewhat louder—with sticks rattled on rocks, and stones flung here and there; presently, on the sky-line of the plateau, a small object appeared, sitting upright and dark against the sky; then it came shambling leisurely along—becoming bigger and bigger and whiter and whiter every moment, until at length it showed itself almost like a cat, but not running stealthily like a cat, rather hopping forward on its ungainly high haunches; and then again it would stop and sit up, its ears thrown back, its eyes not looking at anything in front of it, its snow-white body, with here and there a touch of bluish-brown, offering a tempting target for a pea-rifle. But by this time, of course, numerous others had come hopping over the sky-line; and now as the loud yells and shouts and striking of stones were close at hand, there was more swift running instead of hobbling and pausing among the white frightened creatures; and as they cared for nothing in front (in fact a driven hare cannot see anything that is right ahead of it, and will run against your boots if you happen to be standing in the way), but sped noiselessly across the withered grass and hard clumps of heather—bang! went the first

barrel, and then another and another, as quick as fingers could unload and reload, until here, there, and everywhere —but always within a certain radius from the respective posts—a white object lay on the hard and wintry ground. The beaters came up to gather them together; the two guns had risen from their cold quarters; there were found to be thirteen hares all told—a quite sufficient number for this part—and not one had crawled or hobbled away wounded.

But we will now descend for a time from these bleak altitudes and return to the little hamlet—which seemed to lie there snugly enough and sheltered in the hollow, though the wind was hard on the dark and driven loch. Some hour or so after the shooters and beaters had left, Meenie Douglas came along to Ronald's cottage, and, of course, found Maggie the sole occupant, as she had expected. She was very bright and cheerful and friendly, and spoke warmly of Ronald's kindness in giving her father a day's shooting.

"My mother was a little angry," she said, laughing, "that he should go away just the first thing after coming home; but you know, Maggie, he is so fond of shooting; and it is not always he can get a day, especially at this time of the year; and I am very glad he has gone; for you know there are very few who have to work so hard."

"I wish they may come upon a stag," said the little Maggie—with reckless and irresponsible generosity.

"Do you know, Maggie," said the elder young lady, with a shrewd smile on her face, "I am not sure that my mother likes the people about here to be so kind; she is always expecting my father to get a better post—but I know he is not likely to get one that will suit him as well with the fishing and shooting. There is the Mudal—the gentlemen at the lodge let him have that all the spring through; and when the loch is not let, he can always have a day by writing to Mr. Crawford; and here is Ronald, when the hinds have to be shot at Christmas, and so on. And if the American gentleman takes the shooting as well as the loch, surely he will ask my father to go with him a day or two on the hill; it is a lonely thing shooting by one's self. Well now, Maggie, did you put the curtains up again in Ronald's room?"

"Yes, I did," was the answer, "and he did not tear them down this time, for I told him you showed me how to hang them; but he has tied them back so that they might just as well not be there at all. Come and see, Meenie dear."

She led the way into her brother's room; and there, sure enough, the window-curtains (which were wholly unnecessary, by the way, except from the feminine point of view, for there was certainly not too much light coming in by the solitary window) had been tightly looped and tied back, so that the view down the loch should be unimpeded.

"No matter," said Meenie; "the window is not so bare-looking as it used to be. And I suppose he will let them remain up now."

"Oh yes, when he was told that you had something to do with them," was the simple answer.

Meenie went to the wooden mantelpiece, and put the few things there straight, just as she would have done in her own room, blowing the light white peat-dust off them, and arranging them in neater order.

"I wonder, now," she said, "he does not get frames for these photographs; they will be spoiled by finger marks and the dust."

Maggie said shyly—

"That was what he said to me the other day—but not about these—about the one you gave me of yourself. He asked to see it, and I showed him how careful I was in wrapping it up; but he said no—the first packman that came through I was to get a frame if he had one, and glass too; or else that he would send it in to Inverness to be framed. But you know, Meenie, it's not near so nice-looking—or anything, anything like so nice-looking—as you are."

"Nothing could be that, I am sure," said Meenie lightly; and she was casting her eyes about the room, to see what further improvements she could suggest.

But Maggie had grown suddenly silent, and was standing at the little writing-table, apparently transfixed with astonishment. It will be remembered that when Ronald, in the morning, heard that the Doctor was at the door of the inn, he had hurriedly hastened away to intercept him;

and that, subsequently, in order to same time, he had sent back a lad for his gun and cartridges, while he went on to the farm. Now it was this last arrangement that caused him to overlook the fact that he had left his writing materials—the blotting-pad and everything—lying exposed on the table; a piece of neglect of which he had scarcely ever before been guilty. And as ill-luck would have it, as Maggie was idly wandering round the room, waiting for Meenie to make any further suggestions for the smartening of it, what must she see lying before her, among these papers, but a letter, boldly and conspicuously addressed?

"Well!" she exclaimed, as she took it up. "Meenie, here is a letter for you! why didna he send it along to you?"

"A letter for me?" Meenie said, with a little surprise. "No! why should Ronald write a letter to me?—I see him about every day."

"But look!"

Meenie took the letter in her hand; and regarded the address; and laughed.

"It is very formal," said she. "There is no mistake about it. '*Miss Wilhelmina Stuart Douglas*'—when was I ever called that before? And '*Inver-Mudal, Sutherlandshire, N.B.*' He should have added *Europe*, as if he was sending it from the moon. Well, it is clearly meant for me, any way—oh, and open too——"

The next minute all the careless amusement fled from her face; her cheeks grew very white, and a frightened, startled look sprang to her eyes. She but caught the first few lines—

> "*O wilt thou be my dear love?*
> (*Meenie and Meenie*)
> *O wilt thou be my ain love?*
> (*My sweet Meenie*),"

and then it was with a kind of shiver that her glance ran over the rest of it; and her heart was beating so that she could not speak; and there was a mist before her eyes.

"Maggie," she managed to say at length—and she hurriedly folded up the paper again and placed it on the table with the others—"I should not have read it—it was

not meant for me—it was not meant that I should read it —come away, come away, Maggie."

She took the younger girl out of the room, and herself shut the door, firmly, although her fingers were all trembling.

"Maggie," she said, "you must promise never to tell any one that you gave me that letter—that I saw it——"

"But what is the matter, Meenie?" the smaller girl said in bewilderment, for she could see by the strange half-frightened look of Miss Douglas's face that something serious had happened.

"Well, it is nothing—it is nothing," she forced herself to say. "It will be all right. I shouldn't have read the letter —it was not meant for me to see—but if you say nothing about it, no harm will be done. That's all; that's all. And now I am going to see if the children are ready that are to go by the mail-car."

"But I will go with you, Meenie."

Then the girl seemed to recollect herself; and she glanced round at the interior of the cottage, and at the little girl, with an unusual kind of look.

"No, no, not this morning, Maggie," she said. "You have plenty to do. Good-bye—good-bye!" and she stooped and kissed her, and patted her on the shoulder, and left, seeming anxious to get away and be by herself.

Maggie remained there in considerable astonishment. What had happened? Why should she not go to help with the children? and why good-bye—when Meenie would be coming along the road in less than an hour, as soon as the mail-car had left? And all about the reading of something contained in that folded sheet of paper. However, the little girl wisely resolved that, whatever was in that letter, she would not seek to know it, nor would she speak of it to any one, since Meenie seemed so anxious on that point; and so she set about her domestic duties again—looking forward to the end of these and the resumption of her knitting of her brother's jersey.

Well, the winter's day went by, and they had done good work on the hill. As the dusk of the afternoon began to creep over the heavens, they set out for the lower slopes on their way home; and very heavily weighted the lads were with the white creatures slung over their backs on sticks.

But the dusk was not the worst part of this descent; the wind was now driving over heavy clouds from the north; and again and again they would be completely enveloped, and unable to see anywhere more than a yard from their feet. In these circumstances Ronald took the lead; the Doctor coming next, and following, indeed, more by sound than by sight; the lads bringing up in the wake in solitary file, with their heavy loads thumping on their backs. It was a ghostly kind of procession; though now and again the close veil around them would be rent in twain, and they would have a glimpse of something afar off—perhaps a spur of Ben Loyal, or the dark waters of Loch Meidie studded with its small islands. Long before they had reached Inver-Mudal black night had fallen; but now they were on easier ground; and at last the firm footing of the road echoed to their measured tramp, as the invisible company marched on and down to the warmth and welcome lights of the inn.

The Doctor, feeling himself something of a truant, went on direct to his cottage; but the others entered the inn; and as Ronald forthwith presented Mrs. Murray with half a dozen of the hares, the landlord was right willing to call for ale for the beaters, who had had a hard day's work. Nor was Ronald in a hurry to get home; for he heard that Maggie was awaiting him in the kitchen; and so he and Mr. Murray had a pipe and a chat together, as was their custom. Then he sent for his sister.

"Well, Maggie, lass," said he, as they set out through the dark, "did you see all the bairns safely off this morning?"

"No, Ronald," she said, "Meenie did not seem to want me; so I stayed at home."

"And did you find Harry sufficient company for ye? But I suppose Miss Douglas came and stayed with ye for a while."

"No, Ronald," said the little girl, in a tone of some surprise; "she has not been near the house the whole day, since the few minutes in the morning."

"Oh," said he, lightly, "she may have been busy, now her father is come home. And ye maun try and get on wi' your lessons as well as ye can, lass, without bothering Miss

Douglas too much; she canna always spend so much time with ye."

The little girl was silent. She was thinking of that strange occurrence in the morning of which she was not to speak; and in a vague kind of way she could not but associate that with Meenie's absence all that day, and also with the unusual tone of her "good-bye." But yet, if there were any trouble, it would speedily pass away. Ronald would put everything right. Nobody could withstand him —that was the first and last article of her creed. And so, when they got home, she proceeded cheerfully enough to stir up the peats, and to cook their joint supper in a manner really skilful for one of her years; and she laid the cloth; and put the candles on the table; and had the tea and everything ready. Then they sate down; and Ronald was in very good spirits, and talked to her, and tried to amuse her. But the little Maggie rather wistfully looked back to the brilliant evening before, when Meenie was with them; and perhaps wondered whether there would ever again be a supper-party as joyful and friendly and happy as they three had been when they were all by themselves in the big gaily-lit barn.

CHAPTER XII.

"WHEN SHADOWS FALL."

THE deershed adjoining the kennels was a gloomy place, with its bare walls, its lack of light, and its ominous-looking crossbeams, ropes, and pulley for hanging up the slain deer; and the morning was dark and lowering, with a bitter wind howling along the glen, and sometimes bringing with it a sharp smurr of sleet from the northern hills. But these things did not seem to affect Ronald's spirits much as he stood there, in his shirt-sleeves, and bare-headed, sorting out the hares that were lying on the floor, and determining to whom and to whom such and such a brace or couple of brace should be sent. Four of the plumpest he had already selected for Mrs. Douglas (in the vague hope that the useful present might make her a little more placable), and he was going on with his choosing and setting aside—sometimes lighting a pipe—sometimes singing carelessly—

"O we aft hae met at e'en, bonnie Peggie, O,
On the banks o' Cart sae green, bonnie Peggie, O,
Where the waters smoothly rin,
Far aneath the roarin' linn,
Far frae busy strife and din, bonnie Peggie, O"—

when the little Maggie came stealing in.

"Ronald," she said, with an air of reproach, "why are ye going about on such a morning without your jacket, and bare-headed, too?"

"Toots, toots, lassie, it's a fine morning," said he indifferently.

"It was Meenie said I was not to let you do such foolish things," the little lass ventured to say diffidently.

Of course this put a new aspect on the case, but he would not admit as much directly.

"Oh, well," said he, "if you bring me out my coat and bonnet I will put them on, for I'm going down to the Doctor's with two or three of the hares."

And then she hesitated.

"Ronald," said she, "I will take them to Mrs. Douglas, if you like."

"You?" said he.

"For I would give them to her with a nice message from you; and—and—if you take them, you will say nothing at all; and where is the compliment?"

He laughed.

"Ye're a wise little lass; but four big hares are heavy to carry—with the wind against ye; so run away and get me my coat and my Glengarry; and I will take them along myself, compliment or no compliment."

However, as it turned out, Mrs. Douglas was not the first of the family he was fated to meet that morning. He had scarcely left the deershed when he perceived Meenie coming along the road; and this was an auspicious and kindly event; for somehow the day seemed to go by more smoothly and evenly and contentedly when he had chanced to meet Meenie in the morning, and have a few minutes' chat with her about affairs in general, and an assurance that all was going well with her. So he went forward to meet her with a light heart; and he thought she would be pleased that he was taking the hares to her mother; and

perhaps, too, he considered that they might be a little more frank in their friendship after the exceeding good fellowship of the night of the children's party.

He went forward unsuspectingly.

"Good-morning, Miss Douglas!" said he, slackening in his pace, for naturally they always stopped for a few seconds or minutes when they met thus.

But to his astonishment Miss Douglas did not seem inclined to stay. Her eyes were bent on the ground as she came along; she but timidly half lifted them as she reached him; and "Good-morning, Ronald!" she said, and would have passed on. And then it seemed as if, in her great embarrassment, she did not know what to do. She stopped; her face was suffused with red; and she said hurriedly—and yet with an effort to appear unconcerned—

"I suppose Maggie is at home?"

"Oh yes," said he, and her manner was so changed that he also scarce knew what to say or to think.

And again she was going on, and again she lingered—with a sudden fear that she might be thought ungracious or unkind.

"The children all got away safely yesterday morning," said she—but her eyes never met his; and there was still tell-tale colour in her cheeks.

"So I heard," he answered.

"I am sure they must have enjoyed the evening," she said, as if forcing herself to speak.

And then it suddenly occurred to him—for this encounter had been all too brief and bewildering for any proper understanding of it—that perhaps her mother had been reproving her for being too friendly with the people about the inn and with himself, and that he was only causing her embarrassment by detaining her, and so he said—

"Oh yes, I'm sure o' that. Well, good-morning, Miss Douglas; I'm going along to give your mother these two or three hares."

"Good-morning," said she—still without looking at him—and then she went.

And he, too, went on his way; but only for a brief space; presently he sate down on the low stone dyke by the roadside, and dropped the hares on the ground at his

feet. What could it all mean? She seemed anxious to limit their acquaintanceship to the merest formalities; and yet to be in a manner sorry for having to do so. Had he unwittingly given her some cause of offence? He began to recall the minutest occurrences of the night of the children's party—wondering if something had then happened to account for so marked a change? But he could think of nothing. The supper-party of three was of her own suggestion; she could not be angry on that account. Perhaps he ought to have asked this person or that person over from the inn to join them, for the sake of propriety? Well, he did not know much about such matters; it seemed to him that they were very happy as they were; and that it was nobody else's business. But would she quarrel with him on that account? Or on account of his smoking in her presence? Again and again he wished that his pipe had been buried at the bottom of the loch; and indeed his smoking of it that evening had given him no enjoyment whatever, except in so far as it seemed to please her; but surely, in any case, that was a trifle? Meenie would not suddenly become cold and distant (in however reluctant a way) for a small matter like that? Nor could she be angry with him for taking her father away for a day on the hill; she was always glad when the Doctor got a day's shooting from anybody. No; the only possible conclusion he could come to was that Mrs. Douglas had more strongly than ever disapproved of Meenie's forming friendships among people not of her own station in life; and that some definite instructions had been given, which the girl was anxious to obey. And if that were so, ought he to make it any the more difficult for her? He would be as reserved and distant as she pleased. He knew that she was a very kindly and sensitive creature; and might dread giving pain; and herself suffer a good deal more than those from whom she was in a measure called upon to separate herself. That was a reason why it should be made easy for her; and he would ask Maggie to get on with her lessons by herself, as much as she could; and when he met Miss Douglas on the road, his greeting of her would be of the briefest—and yet with as much kindness as she chose to accept in a word or a look. And if he might not present her with the polecat's

skin that was now just about dressed?—well, perhaps the American gentleman's daughter would take it, and have it made into something, when she came up in March.

The pretty, little, doll-like woman, with the cold eyes and the haughty stare, was at the front-door of the cottage, scattering food to the fowls.

"I have brought ye two or three hares, Mrs. Douglas, if they're of any use to ye," Ronald said modestly.

"Thank you," said she, with lofty courtesy, "thank you; I am much obliged. Will you step in and sit down for a few minutes?—I am sure a little spirits will do you no harm on such a cold morning."

In ordinary circumstances he would have declined that invitation; for he had no great love of this domineering little woman, and much preferred the society of her big, good-natured husband; but he was curious about Meenie, and even inclined to be resentful, if it appeared that she had been dealt with too harshly. So he followed Mrs. Douglas into the dignified little parlour—which was more like a museum of cheap curiosities than a room meant for actual human use; and forthwith she set on the crimson-dyed table-cover a glass, a tumbler, a jug of water, and a violet-coloured bulbous glass bottle with an electro-plated stopper. Ronald was bidden to help himself; and also, out of her munificence, she put before him a little basket of sweet biscuits.

"I hear the Doctor is away again," Ronald said—and a hundred times would he rather not have touched the violet bottle at all, knowing that her clear, cold, blue eyes were calmly regarding his every movement.

"Yes," she said, "to Tongue. There is a consultation there. I am sure he has had very little peace and quiet lately."

"I am glad he had a holiday yesterday," Ronald said, with an endeavour to be agreeable.

But she answered severely—

"It might have been better if he had spent the first day of his getting back with his own family. But that has always been his way; everything sacrificed to the whim of the moment—to his own likings and dislikings."

"He enjoys a day's sport as much as any man I ever

saw," said he—not knowing very well what to talk about.

"Yes, I daresay," she answered shortly.

Then she pushed the biscuits nearer him; and returned to her attitude of observation, with her small, neat, white hands crossed on her lap, the rings on the fingers being perhaps just a little displayed.

"Miss Douglas is looking very well at present," he said, at a venture.

"Williamina is well enough—she generally is," she said coldly. "There is never much the matter with her health. She might attend to her studies a little more and do herself no harm. But she takes after her father."

There was a little sigh of resignation.

"Some of us," said he good-naturedly, "were expecting her to come over on Monday night to see the dancing."

But here he had struck solid rock. In a second—from her attitude and demeanour—he had guessed why it was that Meenie had not come over to the landlord's party: a matter about which he had not found courage to question Meenie herself.

"Williamina," observed the little dame, with a magnificent dignity, "has other things to think of—or ought to have, at her time of life, and in her position. I have had occasion frequently of late to remind her of what is demanded of her; she must conduct herself not as if she were for ever to be hidden away in a Highland village. It will be necessary for her to take her proper place in society, that she is entitled to from her birth and her relatives; and of course she must be prepared—of course she must be prepared. There are plenty who will be willing to receive her; it will be her own fault if she disappoints them—and us, too, her own parents. Williamina will never have to lead the life that I have had to lead, I hope; she belongs by birth to another sphere; and I hope she will make the most of her chances."

"Miss Douglas would be made welcome anywhere, I am sure," he ventured to say; but she regarded him with a superior look—as if it were not for him to pronounce an opinion on such a point.

"Soon," she continued—and she was evidently bent on impressing him, "she will be going to Glasgow to finish in

music and German, and to get on with her Italian: you will see she has no time to lose in idle amusement. We would send her to Edinburgh or to London, but her sister being in Glasgow is a great inducement; and she will be well looked after. But, indeed, Williamina is not the kind of girl to go and marry a penniless student; she has too much common sense; and, besides, she has seen how it turns out. Once in a family is enough. No; we count on her making a good marriage, as the first step towards her taking the position to which she is entitled; and I am sure that Lady Stuart will take her in hand, and give her every chance. As for their taking her abroad with them—and Sir Alexander almost promised as much—what better could there be than that?—she would be able to show off her acquirements and accomplishments; she would be introduced to the distinguished people at the ministerial receptions and balls; she would have her chance, as I say. And with such a chance before her, surely it would be nothing less than wicked of her to fling away her time in idle follies. I want her to remember what lies before her; a cottage like this is all very well for me—I have made my bed and must lie on it; but for her—who may even be adopted by Lady Stuart—who knows? for stranger things have happened—it would be downright madness to sink into content with her present way of life."

"And when do you think that M— that Miss Douglas will be going away to Glasgow?" he asked—but absently, as it were, for he was thinking of Inver-Mudal, and Clebrig, and Loch Loyal, and Strath-Terry, and of Meenie being away from them all.

"That depends entirely on herself," was the reply. "As soon as she is sufficiently forward all round for the finishing lessons, her sister is ready to receive her."

"It will be lonely for you with your daughter away," said he.

"Parents have to make sacrifices," she said. "Yes, and children too. And better they should make them while they are young than all through the years after. I hope Williamina's will be no wasted life."

He did not know what further to say; he was dismayed, perplexed, downhearted, or something: if this was a lesson

she had meant to read him, it had struck home. So he rose and took his leave; and she thanked him again for the hares; and he went out, and found Harry awaiting him on the doorstep. Moreover, as he went down to the little gate, he perceived that Meenie was coming back—she had been but to the inn with a message; and, obeying some curious kind of instinct, he turned to the left—pretending not to have seen her coming; and soon he was over the bridge, and wandering away up the lonely glen whose silence is broken only by the whispering rush of Mudal Water.

He wandered on and on through the desolate moorland, on this wild and blustering day, paying but little heed to the piercing wind or the driven sleet that smote his eyelids. And he was not so very sorrowful; his common sense had told him all this before; Rose Meenie, Love Meenie, was very well in secret fancies and rhymes and verses; but beyond that she was nothing to him. And what would Clebrig do, and Mudal Water, and all the wide, bleak country that had been brought up in the love of her, and was saturated with the charm of her presence, and seemed for ever listening in deathlike silence for the light music of her voice? There were plenty of verses running through his head on this wild day too; the hills and the clouds and the January sky were full of speech; and they were all of them to be bereft of her as well as he:—

Mudal, that comes from the lonely loch,
Down through the moorland russet and brown,
Know you the news that we have for you?—
Meenie's away to Glasgow town.

See Ben Clebrig, his giant front
Hidden and dark with a sudden frown;
What is the light of the valley to him,
Since Meenie's away to Glasgow town?

Empty the valley, empty the world,
The sun may arise and the sun go down;
But what to do with the lonely hours,
Since Meenie's away to Glasgow town?

Call her back, Clebrig! Mudal, call,
Ere all of the young spring time be flown;
Birds, trees, and blossoms—you that she loved—
O summon her back from Glasgow town!

"*Call her back, Clebrig! Mudal, call!*" he repeated to

himself as he marched along the moorland road; for what would they do without some one to guard, and some one to watch for, and some one to listen for, in the first awakening of the dawn? Glasgow—the great and grimy city—that would be a strange sort of guardian, in the young spring days that were coming, for this fair Sutherland flower. And yet might not some appeal be made even there—some summons of attention, as it were?

O Glasgow town, how little you know
That Meenie has wandered in
To the very heart of your darkened streets,
Through all the bustle and din.

A Sutherland blossom shining fair
Amid all your dismal haze,
Forgetting the breath of the summer hills,
And the blue of the Northern days.

From Dixon's fire-wreaths to Rollox stalk,
Blow, south wind, and clear the sky,
Till she think of Ben Clebrig's sunny slopes,
Where the basking red-deer lie.

Blow, south wind, and show her a glimpse of blue
Through the pall of dusky brown;
And see that you guard her and tend her well,
You, fortunate Glasgow town!

But then—but then—that strange, impossible time—during which there would be no Meenie visible anywhere along the mountain roads; and Mudal Water would go by unheeded; and there would be no careless, clear-singing girl's voice along Loch Naver's shores—that strange time would surely come to an end, and he could look forward and see how the ending of it would be:

The clouds lay heavy on Clebrig's crest,
For days and weeks together;
The shepherds along Strath-Terry's side
Cursed at the rainy weather;
They scarce could get a favouring day
For the burning of the heather.

When sudden the clouds were rent in twain
And the hill laughed out to the sun;
And the hinds stole up, with wondering eyes,
To the far slopes yellow and dun;
And the birds were singing in every bush
As at spring anew begun.

O Clebrig, what is it that makes you glad,
And whither is gone your frown?
Are you looking afar into the south,
The long, wide strath adown?
And see you that Meenie is coming back—
Love Meenie, from Glasgow town!

He laughed. Not yet was Love Meenie taken away from them all. And if in the unknown future the Stuarts of Glengask and Orosay were to carry her off and make a great lady of her, and take her to see strange places, and perhaps marry her to some noble person, at least in the meantime Ben Clebrig and Ben Loyal and the wide straths between knew that they still held in the mighty hollow of their hand this sweet flower of Sutherlandshire, and that the world and the skies and the woods and lakes seemed fairer because of her presence. And as regarded himself, and his relations with her? Well, what must be must. Only he hoped—and there was surely no great vanity nor self-love nor jealousy in so modest a hope—that the change of her manner towards him was due to the councils of her mother rather than to anything he had unwittingly said or done. Rose Meenie—Love Meenie—he had called her in verses; but always he had been most respectful to herself; and he could not believe that she thought him capable of doing anything to offend her.

CHAPTER XIII.

A NEW ARRIVAL.

VERY early one Sunday morning, while as yet all the world seemed asleep, a young lady stole out from the little hotel at Lairg, and wandered down by herself to the silent and beautiful shores of Loch Shin. The middle of March it was now, and yet the scene around her was quite summer-like; and she was a stranger from very far climes indeed, who had ventured into the Highlands at this ordinarily untoward time of the year; so that there was wonder as well as joy in her heart as she regarded the fairyland before her, for it was certainly not what she had been taught to expect. There was not a ripple on the glassy surface of the

lake; every feature of the sleeping and faintly sunlit world was reflected accurately on the perfect mirror: the browns and yellows of the lower moorland; the faint purple of the birch-woods; the aerial blues of the distant hills, with here and there a patch of snow; and the fleecy white masses of the motionless clouds. It was a kind of dream-world—soft-toned and placid and still, the only sharp bit of colour being the scarlet-painted lines of a boat that floated double on that sea of glass. There was not a sound anywhere but the twittering of small birds; nor any movement but the slow rising into the air of a tiny column of blue smoke from a distant cottage; summer seemed to be here already, as the first light airs of the morning—fresh and clear and sweet—came stealing along the silver surface of the water, and only troubling the magic picture here and there in long trembling swathes.

The young lady was of middle height, but looked taller than that by reason of her slight and graceful form; she was pale, almost sallow, of face, with fine features and a pretty smile; her hair was of a lustrous black; and so, too, were her eyes—which were large and soft and attractive. Very foreign she looked as she stood by the shores of this Highland loch; her figure and complexion and beautiful opaque soft dark eyes perhaps suggesting more than anything else the Spanish type of the Southern American woman; but there was nothing foreign about her attire; she had taken care about that; and if her jet-black hair and pale cheek had prompted her to choose unusual tones of colour, at all events the articles of her costume were all correct—the warm and serviceable ulster of some roughish yellow and gray material, the buff-coloured, gauntleted gloves, and the orange-hued Tam o' Shanter which she wore quite as one to the manner born. For the rest, one could easily see that she was of a cheerful temperament; pleased with herself; not over shy, perhaps; and very straightforward in her look.

However, the best description of this young lady was the invention of an ingenious youth dwelling on the southern shores of Lake Michigan.—"Carry Hodson," he observed on one occasion, "is just a real good fellow, that's what she is." It was a happy phrase, and it soon became

popular among the young gentlemen who wore English hats and vied with each other in driving phantom vehicles behind long-stepping horses. "Carry Hodson?—she's just the best fellow going," they would assure you. And how better can one describe her? There was a kind of frank *camaraderie* about her; and she liked amusement, and was easily amused; and she laboured under no desire at all of showing herself "bright"—which chiefly reveals itself in impertinence; but, above all, there was in her composition not a trace of alarm over her relations, however frank and friendly, with the other sex; she could talk to any man—old or young, married or single—positively without wondering when he was about to begin to make love to her. For one thing, she was quite capable of looking after herself; for another, the very charm of her manner—the delightful openness and straightforwardness of it—seemed to drive flirtation and sham sentiment forthwith out of court. And if, when those young gentlemen in Chicago called Miss Carry Hodson "a real good fellow," they could not help remembering at the same time that she was an exceedingly pretty girl, perhaps they appreciated so highly the privilege of being on good-comrade terms with her that they were content to remain there rather than risk everything by seeking for more. However, that need not be discussed further here. People did say, indeed, that Mr. John C. Huysen, the editor of the *Chicago Citizen*, was more than likely to carry off the pretty heiress; if there was any truth in the rumour, at all events Miss Carry Hodson remained just as frank and free and agreeable with everybody—especially with young men who could propose expeditions and amusements.

Now there was only one subject capable of entirely upsetting this young lady's equanimity; and it is almost a pity to have to introduce it here; for the confession must be made that, on this one subject, she was in the habit of using very reprehensible language. Where, indeed, she had picked up so much steamboat and backwoods slang—unless through the reading of *Texas Siftings*—it is impossible to say; but her father, who was about the sole recipient of these outbursts, could object with but little show of authority, for he was himself exceedingly fond, not

exactly of slang, but of those odd phrases, sometimes half-humorous, that the Americans invent from day to day to vary the monotony of ordinary speech. These phrases are like getting off the car and running alongside a little bit; you reach your journey's end—the meaning of the sentence—all the same. However, the chief bugbear and grievance of Miss Carry Hodson's life was the Boston girl as displayed to us in fiction; and so violent became her detestation of that remarkable young person that it was very nearly interfering with her coming to Europe.

"But, pappa dear," she would say, regarding the book before her with some amazement, "will the people in Europe think I am like *that?*"

"They won't think anything about you," he would say roughly.

"What a shame—what a shame—to say American girls are like *that!*" she would continue vehemently. "The self-conscious little beasts—with their chatter about tone, and touch, and culture! And the men—my gracious, pappa, do the people in England think that our young fellows talk like *that?* 'Analyse me; formulate me!' he cries to the girl; 'can't you imagine my environment by the aid of your own intuitions?'—I'd analyse him if he came to me; I'd analyse him fast enough: Nine different sorts of a born fool; and the rest imitation English prig. I'd formulate him if he came to me with his pretentious idiotcy; I'd show him the kind of chipmunk I am."

"You are improving, Miss Carry," her father would say resignedly. "You are certainly acquiring force in your language; and sooner or later you will be coming out with some of it when you least expect it; and then whether it's you or the other people that will get fits I don't know. You'll make them jump."

"No, no, pappa dear," she would answer good-naturedly; for her vehemence was never of long duration. "I have my company manners when it is necessary. Don't I know what I am? Oh yes, I do. I'm a real high-toned North Side society lady; and can behave as sich—when there's anybody present. But when it's only you and me, pappa, I like to wave the banner a little—that's all."

This phrase of hers, about waving the banner, had come

to mean so many different things that her father could not follow half of them, and so it was handy in winding up a discussion; and he could only remark, with regard to her going to Europe, and her dread lest she should be suspected of resembling one of the imaginary beings for whom she had conceived so strong a detestation, that really people in Europe were as busy as people elsewhere, and might not show too absorbing an interest in declaring what she was like; that perhaps their knowledge of the Boston young lady of fiction was limited, and the matter not one of deep concern; and that the best thing she could do was to remember that she was an American girl, and that she had as good a right to dress in her own way and speak in her own way and conduct herself in her own way as any French, or German, or English, or Italian person she might meet. All of which Miss Carry received with much submission—except about dress: she hoped to be able to study that subject, with a little attention, in Paris.

Well, she was standing there looking abroad on the fairy-like picture of lake and wood and mountain—and rather annoyed, too, that, now she was actually in the midst of scenes that she had prepared herself for by reading, she could recollect none of the reading at all, but was wholly and simply interested in the obvious beauty of the place itself—when she became conscious of a slow and stealthy footstep behind her, and, instantly turning, she discovered that a great dun-coloured dog, no doubt belonging to the hotel, had come down to make her acquaintance. He said as much by a brief and heavy gambol, a slow wagging of his mighty tail, and the upturned glance of his small, flat, leonine eyes.

"Well," she said, "who are you? Would you like to go for a walk?"

Whether he understood her or no he distinctly led the way—taking the path leading along the shores of the loch towards Inver-shin; and as there did not seem to be any sign yet of anybody moving about the hotel, she thought she might just as well take advantage of this volunteered escort. Not that the mastiff was over communicative in his friendliness; he would occasionally turn round to see if she was following; and if she called to him and spoke to him,

he would merely make another heavy effort at a gambol and go on again with his slow-moving pace. Now and again a shepherd's collie would come charging down on him from the hillside, or two or three small terriers, keeping sentry at the door of a cottage, would suddenly break the stillness of the Sunday morning by the most ferocious barking at his approach; but he took no heed of one or the other.

"Do you know that you are an amiable dog—but not amusing?" she said to him, when he had to wait for her to let him get through a swinging stile. "I've got a dog at home not a quarter as big as you, and he can talk twice as much. I suppose your thoughts are important, though. What do they call you? Dr. Johnson?"

He looked at her with the clear, lionlike eyes, but only for a second; seemed to think it futile trying to understand her; and then went on again with his heavy, shambling waddle. And she liked the freshness of the morning, and the novelty of being all alone by herself in the Scottish Highlands, and of going forward as a kind of pioneer and discoverer; and so she walked on in much delight, listening to the birds, looking at the sheep, and thinking nothing at all of breakfast, and the long day's drive before her father and herself.

And then a sudden conviction was flashed on her mind that something was wrong. There was a man coming rushing along the road after her—with neither coat nor cap on—and as he drew near she could hear him say—

"Ah, you rascal! you rascal! Bolted again?"

He seemed to pay no attention to her; he ran past her and made straight for the mastiff; and in a couple of minutes had a muzzle securely fastened on the beast, and was leading him back with an iron chain.

"Surely that is not a ferocious dog?" said she, as they came up—and perhaps she was curious to know whether she had run any chance of being eaten.

"The master had to pay five pounds last year for his worrying sheep—the rascal," said the man; and the great dog wagged his tail as if in approval.

"Why, he seems a most gentle creature," she said, walking on with the man.

"Ay, and so he is, miss—most times. But he's barely

three years old, and already he's killed two collies and a terrier, and worried three sheep."

"Killed other dogs? Oh, Dr. Johnson!" she exclaimed.

"He's sweirt * to begin, miss; but when he does begin he *maun* kill—there's no stopping him. The rascal! he likes fine to get slippin' away wi' one of the gentlefolks, if he's let off the chain for a few minutes—it's a God's mercy he has done no harm this morning—it was the ostler let him off the chain—and he'd have lost his place if there had been ony mair worrying."

"No, no, no, he would not," she said confidently. "I took the dog away. If any mischief had been done, I would have paid—why, of course."

"*Why, of cois*," was what she really said; but all the man knew was that this American young lady spoke with a very pleasant voice; and seemed good-natured; and was well-meaning, too, for she would not have had the ostler suffer. Anyway, the mastiff, with as much dignity as was compatible with a muzzle and an iron chain, was conducted back to his kennel; and Miss Hodson went into the hotel, and expressed her profound sorrow that she had kept breakfast waiting; but explained to her father that it was not every morning she had the chance of exploring the Highlands all by herself—or rather accompanied by a huge creature apparently of amiable nature, but with really dark possibilities attached.

In due course of time the waggonette and horses were brought round to the door of the little hotel; their baggage was put in; and presently they had set forth on their drive through the still, sunlit, solitary country. But this was a far more pleasant journey than his first venturing into these wilds. He had been warning his daughter of the bleak and savage solitude she would have to encounter; but now it appeared quite cheerful—in a subdued kind of way, as if a sort of Sunday silence hung over the landscape. The pale blue waters of Loch Shin, the beech-woods, the russet slopes of heather, the snow-touched azure hills along the horizon—all these looked pretty and were peacefully shining on this fair morning; and even after they had got

* *Sweirt*, reluctant.

away from the last trace of human habitation, and were monotonously driving through mile after mile of the wide, boggy, hopeless peatland, the winter colours were really brighter than those of summer, and the desolation far from overpowering. If they met with no human beings, there were other living objects to attract the eye. A golden plover—standing on a hillock not half a dozen yards off, would be calling to his mate; a wild duck would go whirring by; a red-plumed grouse-cock would cease dusting himself in the road, and would be off into the heather as they came along, standing and looking at them as they passed. And so on and on they went, mile after mile, along the fair shining Strath-Terry; the morning air blowing freshly about them; the sunlight lying placidly on those wide stretches of russet and golden bogland; and now and again a flash of dark blue showing where some mountain-tarn lay silent amid the moors.

"And you thought I should be disappointed, pappa dear?" said Miss Carry, "or frightened by the loneliness? Why, it's just too beautiful for anything! And so this is where the Clan Mackay lived in former days?"

"Is it?" said her father. "I wonder what they lived on. I don't think we'd give much for that land in Illinois. Give for it? You couldn't get a white man to trade for that sort of land; we'd have to ask Wisconsin to take it and hide it away somewhere."

"What are those things for?" she asked, indicating certain tall poles that stood at intervals along the roadside.

"Why, don't you know? These are poles to tell them where the road is in snow time."

"Then it is not always May in these happy latitudes?" she observed shrewdly.

He laughed.

"I heard some dreadful stories when I was here in January—but I don't believe much in weather stories. Anyhow, we've got to take what comes now; and so far there is not much to howl about."

And at last they came in sight of the ruffled blue waters of Loch Naver; and the long yellow promontories running out into the lake; and the scant birch-woods fringing here and there the rocky shore; with the little hamlet of Inver-

Mudal nestling down there in the hollow; and far away in the north the mountain masses of Ben Hope and Ben Loyal struck white with snow. And she was very curious to see the kind of people who lived in these remote solitudes; and the pretty sloe-black eyes were all alert as the waggonette rattled along towards the two or three scattered houses; and perhaps, as they drove up to the inn, she was wondering whether Ronald the gamekeeper, of whom she had heard so much, would be anywhere visible. But there was scarcely any one there. The Sabbath quiet lay over the little hamlet. Mr. Murray appeared, however,—in his Sunday costume, of course,—and an ostler; and presently Miss Carry and her father were in the sitting-room that had been prepared for them—a great mass of peats cheerfully blazing in the capacious fireplace, and the white-covered table furnished with a substantial luncheon.

"And what do you think of your future maid?" her father asked, when the pretty Nelly had left the room.

"Well, I think she has the softest voice I ever heard a woman speak with," was the immediate answer. "And such a pretty way of talking—and looking at you—very gentle and friendly. But she won't do for my maid, pappa; she's too tall; I should want to put a string round her neck and lead her about like a giraffe."

However, she was pleased with the appearance and manner of the girl, and that was something; for, oddly enough, Mr. Hodson seemed to imagine that he had discovered this remote hamlet, and was responsible for it, and anxious that his daughter should think well of it, and of the people she might meet in it. He called her attention to the scent of the peat; to the neatness with which the joints on the table had been decorated with little paper frills; to the snugness and quiet of the sitting-room; to the spacious character of the views from the windows—one taking in Clebrig and the loch, the other reaching away up to Ben Loyal. All these things he had provided for her, as it were; and it must be said that she was a most excellent travelling-companion, always content, easily interested, never out of humour. So, when he proposed, after luncheon, that they should go along and call on Ronald Strang, she readily consented; no doubt a keeper's dwelling

in these wilds would be something curious—perhaps of a wigwam character, and of course filled with all kinds of trophies of his hunting.

Well, they went along to the cottage, and Mr. Hodson knocked lightly on the door. There was no answer. He rapped a little more loudly; then they heard some one within; and presently the door was thrown open, and Ronald stood before them—a book in one hand, a pipe in the other, no jacket covering his shirt-sleeves, and the absence of any necktie showing a little more than was necessary of the firm set of his sun-tanned throat. He had been caught unawares—as his startled eyes proclaimed; in fact, he had been reading *Paradise Regained*, and manfully resisting the temptation to slip on to the gracious melody of *L'Allegro*, and *Il Penseroso*, and *Lycidas;* and when he heard the tapping he fancied it was merely one of the lads come for a chat or the last newspaper, and had made no preparations for the reception of visitors.

"How are you, Ronald?" said Mr. Hodson. "I have brought my daughter to see you."

"Will ye step in, sir?" said Ronald hastily, and with a terrible consciousness of his untidy appearance. "Ay, in there—will ye sit down for a few minutes—and will ye excuse me—I thought you werena coming till to-morrow——"

"Well, I thought they might object to driving me on a Sunday. I can't make it out. Perhaps what I have read about Scotland is not true. Or perhaps they have altered of late years. Anyhow they made no objection, and here I am."

In the midst of these brief sentences—each pronounced with a little rising inflexion at the end—Ronald managed to slip away and get himself made a little more presentable. When he returned the apparent excuse for his absence was that he brought in some glasses and water and a bottle of whisky; and then he went to a little mahogany sideboard and brought out a tin case of biscuits.

"You need not trouble about these things for us; we have just had lunch," Mr. Hodson said.

"Perhaps the young lady——?" said Ronald timidly, and even nervously, for there was no plate handy, and he did not know how to offer her the biscuits.

"Oh no, I thank you," she said, with a pretty and

gracious smile; and he happened to meet her eyes just at that time; and instantly became aware that they were curiously scrutinising and observant, despite their apparent softness and lustrous blackness.

Now Miss Carry Hodson had an abundance of shrewd feminine perception, and it was easy for her to see that this handsome and stalwart young fellow had been grievously disturbed, and was even now unnerved, through his having been caught in disarray on the occasion of a young lady visiting him; and accordingly, to allow him to recover, she deliberately effaced herself; saying not a word, nor even listening, while her father and he proceeded to talk about the salmon-fishing, and about the distressingly fine weather that threatened to interfere with that pursuit. She sate silent, allowing those observant eyes of hers to roam freely round the room, and indeed wondering how a man of his occupations could so have contrived to rob his home of all distinctive character and to render it so clearly commonplace. There was nothing wild or savage about it; not the skin of any beast, nor the plumage of any bird; everything was of a bourgeois neatness and respectability—the ornaments on the mantelshelf conspicuously so; and what was strangest of all—though this will scarcely be believed—the two roebucks' heads that adorned the wall, in a country where roe abound, were earthenware casts, and very bad casts too, obviously hailing from Germany. She observed, however, that there were a good many books about—some of them even piled in obscure corners; and to judge by the sober character of their cloth binding she guessed them to be of a rather superior class. The pictures on the walls were some cheap reprints of Landseer; a portrait of the Duke of Sutherland, in Highland garb; a view of Dunrobin Castle; and a photograph of Mr. Millais' "Order of Release."

After a while she began to know (without looking) that the young man had assumed sufficient courage to glance at her from time to time; and she allowed him to do that; for she considered that the people in Regent Street had fitted her out in Highland fashion in a sufficiently accurate way. But it soon appeared that he was talking about her; and what was this wild proposal?

"It seems a pity," he was saying, "if the fish are taking, not to have two boats at the work. And there's that big rod o' yours, sir—you could use that for the trolling; and let the young lady have one o' your grilse rods. Then there's mine—she can have that and welcome——"

"Yes, but the gillies——"

"Oh, I'll take a turn myself; I'm no so busy the now. And I can get one o' the lads to lend a hand."

"Do you hear this, Carry?" her father said.

"What, pappa?"

"Ronald wants you to start off salmon-fishing to-morrow, in a boat all to yourself——"

"Alone?"

"Why, no! He says he will go with you, and one of the lads; and you will have all the best advice and experience—I don't think it's fair, myself—but it's very good-natured anyhow——"

"And do you think there's a chance of my catching a salmon?" she said eagerly, and she turned her eloquent black eyes, all lit up with pleasure, full upon him.

"Oh yes, indeed," said he, looking down, "and many and many a one, I am sure, if we could only get a little wet weather."

"My!" she exclaimed. "If I caught a salmon, I'd have it stuffed right away——"

"With sage and onions, I suppose," her father said severely.

"And we begin to-morrow? Why, it's just too delightful—I was looking forward to days and days indoors, with nothing but books. And I shall really have a chance?——"

"I think you might as well thank Ronald for his offer," her father said. "I should never have thought of it."

Well, she hesitated; for it is a difficult thing to make a formal little speech when it is asked for by a third person; but the young keeper quickly laughed away her embarrassment.

"No, no, sir; we'll wait for that till we see how our luck turns out. And we'll have the Duke's boat, mind, that Duncan says is the lucky one; you'll have to look sharp, sir, or we'll have the biggest show on the grass at the end of the day."

Mr. Hodson now rose to take his leave, for he wanted his daughter to walk down to the shores of the loch where they were next day to begin their labours. And thus it was that Miss Carry—who had looked forward at the most to sitting in the boat with her father and looking on—found herself pledged to a course of salmon-fishing, under the immediate guidance and instruction of the young keeper; and she had noticed that he had already talked of the occupants of the Duke's boat as "we"—assuming that he and she were in a sort of partnership, and pitted against the others. Well, it would be amusing, she thought. She also considered that he was very good-looking; and that it would be pleasanter to have a companion of that kind than a surly old boatman. She imagined they might easily become excellent friends—at least she was willing enough; and he seemed civil and good-humoured and modest; and altogether the arrangement promised to work very well.

CHAPTER XIV.

"ABOUT ILLINOIS."

THERE was a good deal of bustle in the inn next morning; Ronald busy with the fishing-tackle for the second boat; luncheon being got ready for six; and the gillies fighting as to which party should have the landing-net and which the clip. In the midst of all this Miss Carry—looking very smart in her Highland costume, Tam o' Shanter and all—came placidly in to breakfast, and as she sate down she said—

"Pappa dear, I met such a pretty girl."

"Have you been out?" he asked.

"Only as far as the bridge. I met her as I was coming back. And she looked so pretty and shy that I spoke to her; I think she was a little frightened at first; but anyway I got to know who she is—the Doctor's daughter. Oh, you should hear her speak—the accent is so pretty and gentle. Well, it's all settled, pappa; I'm just in love with the Highland people, from this out."

"There's safety in numbers," observed her father grimly;

and then he proceeded to explore the contents of the covers.

When they were ready to go down to the loch they found that the men had already set out—all but Ronald, who had remained behind to see if there was nothing further he could carry for the young lady. So these three started together; and of course all the talk was about the far too fine weather, and the chances of getting a fish or two in spite of it, and the betting on the rival boats. Miss Carry listened in silence; so far she had heard or seen nothing very remarkable about the handsome young keeper who had so impressed her father. He spoke frankly and freely enough, it is true (when he was not speaking to her), and he was recounting with some quiet sarcasm certain superstitious beliefs and practices of the people about there; but, apart from the keen look of his eyes, and the manly ring of his voice, and the easy swing of the well-built figure, there was nothing, as she considered, very noticeable about him. She thought his keeper's costume rather picturesque, and weather-worn into harmonious colour; and wondered how men in towns had come to wear the unsightly garments of these present days. And so at last they arrived at the loch; and found that the gillies had got the rods fixed and everything ready; and presently the black boat, with Mr. Hodson and his two gillies, was shoved off, and Ronald, before asking the young lady to step into the green boat—the Duke's boat—was showing her what she should do if a salmon should attach itself to either of the lines.

"I don't feel like catching a salmon somehow," she remarked. "I don't think it can be true. Anyway you'll see I shan't scream."

She stepped into the boat and took her seat; the rods were placed for her; the coble was shoved farther into the water, and then Ronald and the young lad got in and took to the oars. Miss Carry was bidden to pay out one of the lines slowly as they moved away from the bank; and in due course she had both lines out and the two rods fixed at the proper angle, and the reels free. She obeyed all his instructions without haste or confusion. She was a promising pupil. And he wondered what nerve she would show when the crisis came

Now it may be explained for the benefit of those inexperienced in such things that these fishing cobles have a cross bench placed about midway between the stern and the thwart occupied by the stroke oar; and the usual custom is for the fisherman to sit on this bench facing the stern, so that he can see both rods and be ready for the first shaking of the top. But Miss Carry did not understand this at all. In entering the coble she naturally took her place right astern, facing the rowers. It never entered her head to be guilty of the discourtesy of turning her back on them; besides, Ronald was directing her with his eyes as much as with his speech, and she must be able to see him; moreover he did not tell her she was sitting the wrong way; and then again was not the first signal to be the shrieking of the reel?—and both reels were now under her observation, so that she could snatch at either rod in a second. The consequence of all this was that she and Ronald sate face to face—not more than a yard and a half between them—their eyes exactly on a level—and when they spoke to each other, it was very distinctly *unter vier Augen*, for the boy at the bow was mostly hidden.

"Pappa dear," she said to her father that evening, "he is a very nervous man."

"Who?"

"Ronald."

"Nonsense. He is hard as nails. He don't know what nerves mean."

"He is a very nervous man," she insisted (and had she not been studying him for a whole day?). "His eyes throb when you meet them suddenly. Or rather he seems to know they are very powerful and penetrating—and he does not like to stare at you—so you can see there is a tremor of the lid sometimes as he looks up—as if he would partly veil his eyes. It's very curious. He's shy—like a wild animal almost. And that pretty girl I met this morning has something of that look too."

"Perhaps they're not used to having the cold gaze of science turned on them," her father remarked drily.

"Is that me?"

"You may take it that way."

"Then you're quite wrong. It isn't science at all. It is

an active and benevolent sympathy; I am going to make friends with every one of them. Ronald says her name is Miss Douglas—and I mean to call."

"Very well, then," said her father, who left this young lady pretty much the mistress of her own actions.

However, to return to the fishing: the morning did not promise well, the weather being too bright and clear, though there was a very fair breeze—of a curious sultry character for the middle of March—blowing up from the south and making a good ripple on the loch. Again and again the two boats crossed each other; and the invariable cry was—

"Nothing yet?"

And the answer—

"Not a touch."

By this time Miss Carry had got to know a good deal about the young keeper whose eyes were so directly on a level with hers. He had been to Aberdeen, and to Glasgow, and to Edinburgh; but never out of Scotland?—no. Had he no wish to see London and Paris? Had he no wish to see America?—why, if he came over, her father would arrange to have him put in the way of seeing everything. And perhaps he might be tempted to stay?—there were such opportunities for young men, especially in the west. As for her, she was most communicative about herself; and apparently she had been everywhere and seen everything—except Stratford-on-Avon: that was to be the climax; that was to be the last thing they should visit in Europe—and then on to Liverpool and home. She had been a great deal longer in Europe than her father, she said. Her mother was an invalid and could not travel; her brother George (Joidge, she called him) was at school; so she and a schoolfellow of hers had set out for Europe, accompanied by a maid and a courier, and had "seen most everything" from St. Petersburg to Wady Halfa. And all this and more she told him with the black soft eyes regarding him openly; and the pale, foreign, tea-rose tinted face full of a friendly interest; and the pretty, white, delicate small fingers idly intertwisting the buff-coloured gloves that she had taken off at his request. Inver-Mudal, Clebrig, Ben Loyal, the straths and woods around looked to him small and confined on this quiet morning. She seemed to have brought with her a

wider atmosphere, a larger air. And for a young girl like this to know so much—to have seen so much—and to talk so simply and naturally of going here, there, or anywhere, as if distance were nothing, and time nothing, and money nothing; all this puzzled him not a little. She must have courage, then, and daring, and endurance, despite the pale face and the slender figure, and the small, white, blue-veined hands? Why, she spoke of running over to Paris, in about a fortnight's time, to be present at the wedding of a friend, just as any one about here would speak of driving on to Tongue and returning by the mail-cart next day.

Suddenly there was a quick, half-suppressed exclamation.

"There he is!—there he is!"

And all in a second, as it seemed, Ronald had flung his oar back to the lad behind, seized one of the rods and raised it and put it in her hands, and himself got hold of the other, and was rapidly reeling in the line. What was happening she could hardly tell—she was so bewildered. The rod that she painfully held upright was being violently shaken—now and again there was a loud, long whirr of the reel—and Ronald was by her shoulder, she knew, but not speaking a word—and she was wildly endeavouring to recall all that he had told her. Then there was a sudden slackening of the line—what was this?

"All right," said he, very quietly. "Reel in now—as quick as ye can, please."

Well, she was reeling in as hard as her small and delicate wrist was able to do—and in truth she was too bewildered to feel excited; and above all other earthly things was she anxious that she shouldn't show herself a fool, or scream, or let the thing go—when all at once the handle of the reel seemed to be whipped from her grasp; there was a long whirring shriek of the line; she could hear somewhere a mighty splash (though she dared not look at anything but what was in her hands), and at the same moment she fancied Ronald said, with a quiet laugh—

"We've beat them this time—a clean fish!"

"Do you think we'll get him?" she said breathlessly.

"We'll hold on to him as long as he holds on to us," Ronald said; and she heard him add to himself, "I would rather than five shillings we got the first fish!"

"But this thing is so heavy!" she pleaded.

"Never mind—that's right—that's right—keep a good strain on him—we'll soon bring him to his senses."

Again there was a sudden slackening of the line; and this time she actually saw the animal as it sprang into the air—a white gleaming curved thing—but instantly her attention was on the reel.

"That's it—you're doing fine," he said, with an intentional quietude of tone, so that she might not get overnervous and make a mistake.

Then he made her stand up, and fortunately the coble was rocking but little; and he moved her left hand a little higher up the rod, so that she should have better leverage; and she did all that she was bid mutely and meekly, though her arm was already beginning to feel the heavy strain. She vowed to herself that so long as she could draw a breath she would not give in.

The other boat was passing—but of course at a respectful distance.

"Hold on to him, Carry!" her father called.

She paid no heed. She dared not even look in his direction. The fish seemed to be following up the coble now, and it was all that the slender wrist could do to get in the line so as to keep the prescribed curve on the rod. And then she had to give way again; for the salmon went steadily and slowly down—boring and sulking—and they pulled the boat away a bit, lest he should suddenly come to the surface and be after some dangerous cantrip. She took advantage of this period of quiet to pass the rod from her left hand to her right; and that relieved her arm a little; and she even ventured to say—

"How long is he going on like this?"

"We'll give him his own time, Miss," Ronald said.

"Don't call me Miss," she said, with a little vexation.

"I—I beg your pardon—what then?"

"Oh, anything you like. Mind you catch me if I fall into the water."

The truth was she was a little bit excited, and desperately anxious that her strength should hold out; and even permitting herself an occasional gleam of hope and joy and triumph. Her first salmon? Here would be tidings for

the girls at home! If only the beast would do something—or show signs of yielding—anything rather than she should have to give in, and weakly resign the rod to Ronald! As for him, he stood almost touching her shoulder.

"No, no," said he, "there's no fear o' your falling into the water. We've got to get this gentleman out first."

And then her feeble efforts at talking (meant to show that she was not excited, but having exactly the contrary effect) all went by the board. Something was happening—she knew not what—something wild, terrifying, violent, desperate—and apparently quite near—and all the line was slack now—and the handle of the reel stuck in her frantic efforts to turn it with an impossible quickness—and her heart was choking with fright. For why would this beast spring, and splash, and churn the water, while the line seemed to go all wrong and everything become mixed? But her trembling fingers got the reel to work at last; and she wound as quickly as she could; and by this time the salmon had disappeared again, and was bearing an even, dead strain on the rod, but not so heavily as before.

"My gracious!" she said—she was quite breathless.

"It's all right," he said quietly; but he had been pretty breathless too, and for several seconds in blank despair.

The fish began to show signs of yielding—that last fierce thrashing of the water had weakened him. She got in more and more line—Ronald's instructions being of the briefest and quietest—and presently they could see a faint gleam in the water as the big fish sailed this way or that. But still, she knew not what he might not do. That terrible time had been altogether unexpected. And yet she knew—and her left arm was gratefully conscious—that the strain was not so heavy now; the line was quite short; and she became aware that she was exercising more and more power over her captive and could force him to stop his brief and ineffectual rushes.

Once or twice he had come quite near the boat—sailing in on his side, as it were—and then sheering off again at the sight of them; but these efforts to get away were growing more and more feeble; and at last Ronald called—

"We'll try him this time—give him the butt well—that's right—lift his head—now——" and then there was a

quick stroke of the clip, and the great monster was in the boat, and she sank down on to the bench, her arms limp and trembling, but her hand still grasping the rod. And she felt a little inclined to laugh and to cry; and she wondered where her father was; and she looked on in a dazed way as they killed the fish, and got the phantom-minnow out of its mouth, and proceeded to the weighing of the prize.

"Eleven pounds and a half—well done the Duke's boat!" Ronald cried. "Is it your first salmon, Miss Hodson?"

"Why, certainly."

"You'll have to drink its health, or there'll be no more luck for you this season," said he, and he reached back for a pocket-flask.

"But where is my father?" she said—she was anxious he should hear the news.

"Oh," said he coolly, "tney've been into a fish for the last ten minutes; I wouldna tell ye, in case it might distract ye."

"Have they got one?" she cried.

"They've got something—and I dinna think it's a kelt from the way they're working."

She clapped her hands in delight. Yes, and that involuntary little action revealed to her what she had not known before—that one of her fingers was pretty badly cut, and bleeding.

"What's this?" she said, but she did not heed much—now that the great beautiful gleaming fish lay in the bottom of the boat.

Ronald cared a great deal more. He threw aside the flask. A cut?—it was his own stupidity was the cause of it; he ought to have known that her delicate fingers could not withstand the whirring out of the line; he should have allowed her to keep on her gloves. And nothing would do but that she must carefully bathe the wound in the fresh water of the loch; and he produced a piece of plaster; and then he cut a strip off her handkerchief, and bound up the finger so.

"What do I care?" she said—pointing to the salmon.

And then he begged her to drink a little whisky and

water—for luck's sake—though he had been rather scornful about these customs in the morning; and she complied—smiling towards him as the Netherby bride may have looked at Young Lochinvar; but yet he would not drink in her presence; he put the flask aside; and presently they were at their work again, both lines out, and the southerly breeze still keeping up.

They passed the other boat.

"What weight?" was the cry.

"Eleven and a half. Have you got one?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Just over seven."

"Duncan will be a savage man," said Ronald, with a laugh. "It's all the bad luck of his boat, he'll be saying; though it's good enough luck for the two first fish to be clean fish and no kelt."

However, the Duke's boat fell away from its auspicious beginning that morning. When lunch time arrived, and both cobles landed at a part of the shore agreed upon, where there was a large rock for shelter, and a good ledge for a seat, Miss Carry had but the one fish to be taken out and placed on the grass, while her father had two—respectively seven and thirteen pounds. And very picturesque, indeed, it was to see those white gleaming creatures lying there; and the two boats drawn up on the shore, with the long rods out at the stern; and the gillies forming a group at some distance off under the shelter of the stone dyke; and the wide waters of the lake all a breezy blue in the cup of the encircling sunlit hills. Ronald got out the luncheon, for he had seen to the packing of it—and he knew more about table napkins and things of that sort than those men; and then, when he had made everything right, and brought ashore a cushion for Miss Carry to sit upon, and so forth, he went away.

"Ronald," Mr. Hodson called to him, "ain't you going to have some lunch?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come along, then; there's plenty of room right here."

"Thank ye, sir; I know where they've put my little parcel," said he—and he went and sate down with the gillies;

and soon there was enough talking and laughing amongst them—faintly heard across the wind.

"Well?" said her father, when they were left alone.

"Oh, it's just too delightful for anything."

This was her summing up of the whole situation. And then she added—

"Pappa, may I send my salmon to Lily Selden?"

"I wouldn't call it kindness," said he. "Looks more like boasting. And what's the good, since she is staying at a hotel."

"Oh, she will be as glad as I am even to see it. But can't they cook it at a hotel anyway? I want to be even with Lily about that balloon. I don't see much myself in going up in a balloon. I would just like to have Lily here now—think she wouldn't fall down and worship those beautiful creatures?"

"Well, you may send her yours, if you like," her father said. "But you needn't dawdle so over your luncheon. These days are short; and I want to see what we can do on our first trial."

"I'm ready, now, if it comes to that," said she placidly; and she put a couple of sweet biscuits in her pocket, to guard against emergency.

And soon they were afloat again. But what was this that was coming over the brief winter afternoon? The sultry south wind did not die away, nor yet did any manifest clouds appear in the heavens, but a strange gloom began to fill the skies, obscuring the sun, and gradually becoming darker and darker. It was very strange; for, while the skies overhead were thus unnaturally black, and the lapping water around the boats similarly livid, the low-lying hills at the horizon were singularly keen and intense in colour. The air was hot and close, though the breeze still came blowing up Strath-Terry. There was a feeling as if thunder were imminent, though there were no clouds anywhere gathering along the purple mountain-tops.

This unusual darkness seemed to affect the fishing. Round after round they made—touching nothing but one or two kelts; and this Ronald declared to be a bad sign, for that when the kelts began to take, there was small chance of a clean fish. However, Miss Carry did not care. She

had caught her first salmon—that was enough. Nay, it was sufficient to make her very cheerful and communicative; and she told him a good deal about her various friends in the Garden City—but more especially, as it seemed to the respectful listener, of the young men who, from a humble beginning, had been largely successful in business; and she asked him many questions about himself, and was curious about his relations with Lord Ailine. Of course, she went on the assumption that the future of the world lay in America, and that the future of America lay in the bountiful lap of Chicago: and she half intimated that she could not understand how any one could waste his time anywhere else. Her father had been born in a log-cabin; but if he —that is, Ronald—could see the immense blocks devoted to "Hodson's reaper" "on Clinton and Canal streets" he would understand what individual enterprise could achieve out west. The "manifest destiny" of Chicago loomed large in this young lady's mind; the Eastern Cities were "not in it," so to speak; and Ronald heard with reverence of the trade with Montana, and Idaho, and Wyoming, and Colorado, and Utah, and Nevada. It is true that she was recalled from this imparting of information by a twenty-five minutes' deadly struggle with a creature that turned out after all to be a veritable clean salmon: and with this triumph ended the day's sport; for the afternoon was rapidly wearing to dusk. The gloom of the evening, by the way, was not decreased by a vast mass of smoke that came slowly rolling along between the black sky and the black lake; though this portentous thing—that looked as if the whole world were on fire—meant nothing further than the burning of the heather down Strath-Terry way. When both cobles were drawn up on the beach, it was found that Mr. Hodson had also added one clean salmon to his score; so that the five fish, put in a row on the grass, made a very goodly display, and were a sufficiently auspicious beginning.

"Carry," said her father, as they walked home together in the gathering darkness, "do you know what you are expected to do? You have caught your first salmon: that means a sovereign to the men in the boat."

"I will give a sovereign to the young fellow," said she, "and willingly; but I can't offer money to Ronald."

"Why not? it is the custom here."

"Oh, I declare I couldn't do it. My gracious, no! I would sooner—I would sooner—no, no, pappa dear, I could not offer him money."

"Well, we must do something. You see, we are taking up all his time. I suppose we'll have to send for another gillie—if you care to go on with that boat——"

"I should think I did!" she said. "But why should you send for another gillie so long as Ronald says he is not busy? I daresay he can tell us when he is; I don't believe he's half so shy as he looks. And he's much better fun than one of these Highlanders; he wants his own way; and, with all his shyness, he has a pretty good notion of himself and his own opinions. He don't say you are a fool if you differ from him; but he makes you feel like it. And then, besides," she added lightly, "we can make it up to him some way or other. Why, I have been giving him a great deal of good advice this afternoon."

"You? About what?"

"About Illinois," she said.

CHAPTER XV.

WILD TIMES.

WHAT that mysterious gloom had meant on the previous evening was revealed to them the next morning by a roaring wind that came swooping down from the Clebrig slopes, shaking the house, and howling through the bent and leafless trees. The blue surface of the lake was driven white with curling tips of foam; great bursts of sunlight sped across the plains and suddenly lit up the northern hills; now and again Ben Hope or Ben Hee or Ben Loyal would disappear altogether behind a vague mass of gray, and then as quickly break forth again into view, the peaks and shoulders all aglow and the snow-patches glittering clear and sharp. The gillies hung about the inn door, disconsolate. Nelly made no speed with the luncheon-baskets. And probably Mr. Hodson and his daughter would have relapsed into letter-writing, reading, and other feeble methods of passing a rough day in the Highlands, had not Ronald come along

and changed the whole aspect of affairs. For if the wind was too strong, he pointed out, to admit of their working the phantom-minnow properly, they might at least try the fly. There were occasional lulls in the gale. It was something to do. Would Miss Hodson venture? Miss Hodson replied by swinging her waterproof on her arm; and they all set out.

Well, it was a wild experiment. At first, indeed, when they got down to the shores of the loch, the case was quite hopeless; no boat—much less a shallow flat-bottomed coble—could have lived in such a sea; and they merely loitered about, holding themselves firm against the force of the wind, and regarding as best they might the savage beauty of the scene around them—the whirling blue and white of the loch, the disappearing and reappearing hills, the long promontories suddenly become of a vivid and startling yellow, and then as suddenly again steeped in gloom. But Miss Carry was anxious to be aboard.

"We should only be driven across to the shore yonder," Ronald said; "or maybe capsized."

"Oh, but that would be delightful," she remarked instantly. "I never had my life saved. It would read very well in the papers."

"Yes, but it might end the other way," her father interposed. "And then I don't see where the fun would come in—though you would get your newspaper paragraph all the same."

Ronald had been watching the clouds and the direction of the squalls on the loch; there was some appearance of a lull.

"We'll chance it now," he said to the lad; and forthwith they shoved the boat into the water, and arranged the various things.

Miss Carry was laughing. She knew it was an adventure. Her father remonstrated; but she would not be hindered. She took her seat in the coble, and got hold of the rod; then they shoved off and jumped in; and presently she was paying out the line, to which was attached a "silver doctor" about as long as her forefinger. Casting, of course, was beyond her skill, even had the wind been less violent; there was nothing for it but to trail the fly through these rushing and tumbling and hissing waves.

And at first everything seemed to go well enough—except that the coble rolled in the trough of the waves so that every minute she expected to be pitched overboard. They were drifting down the wind; with the two oars held hard in the water to retard the pace; and the dancing movement of the coble was rather enjoyable; and there was a kind of fierceness of sunlight and wind and hurrying water that fired her brain. These poor people lingering on the shore—what were they afraid of? Why, was there ever anything so delightful as this—the cry of the wind and the rush of the water; and everything around in glancing lights and vivid colours; for the lake was not all of that intense and driven blue, it became a beautiful roseate purple where the sunlight struck through the shallows on the long banks of ruddy sand. She would have waved her cap to those poor forlorn ones left behind, but that she felt both hands must be left free in case of emergency.

But alas! that temporary lull in which they had started was soon over. A sharper squall than any before came darkening and tearing across the loch; then another and another; until a downright gale was blowing, and apparently increasing every moment in violence. Whither were they drifting? They dared not run the coble ashore; all along those rocks a heavy sea was breaking white; they would have been upset and the boat stove in in a couple of minutes.

"This'll never do, Johnnie, lad," she heard Ronald call out. "We'll have to fight her back, and get ashore at the top."

"Very well; we can try."

And then the next moment all the situation of affairs seemed changed. There was no longer that too easy and rapid surging along of the coble, but apparently an effort to drive her through an impassable wall of water; while smash after smash on the bows came the successive waves, springing into the air, and coming down on the backs of the men with a rattling volley of spray. Nay, Miss Carry, too, got her Highland baptism—for all her crouching and shrinking and ducking; and her laughing face was running wet; and her eyes—which she would not shut, for they were fascinated with the miniature rainbows that appeared

from time to time in the whirling spray—were half-blinded. But she did not seem to care. There was a fierce excitement and enjoyment in the struggle—for she could see how hard the men were pulling. And which was getting the better of the fight—this firm and patient endeavour, or the fell power of wind and hurrying seas?

And then something happened that made her heart stand still: there was a shriek heard above all the noise of the waves—and instinctively she caught up the rod and found the line whirling out underneath her closed fingers. What was it Ronald had exclaimed? "Oh, thunder!" or some such thing; but the next moment he had called to her in a warning voice—

"Sit still—sit still—don't move—never mind the fish—let him go—he'll break away with the fly and welcome."

But it seemed to him cowardly advice too; and she one behind her father in the score. He sent a glance forward in a kind of desperation: no, there was no sign of the squall moderating, and they were a long way from the head of the loch. Moreover, the salmon, that was either a strong beast or particularly lively, had already taken out a large length of line, in the opposite direction.

"Do you think," said he hurriedly, "you could jump ashore and take the rod with you, if I put you in at the point down there?"

"Yes, yes!" she said, eagerly enough.

"You will get wet."

"I don't care a cent about that—I will do whatever you say——"

He spoke a few words to the lad at the bow; and suddenly shifted his oar thither.

"As hard as ye can, my lad."

And then he seized the rod from her, and began reeling in the line with an extraordinary rapidity, for now they were drifting down the loch again.

"Do ye see the point down there, this side the bay?"

"Yes."

"There may be a little shelter there; and we're going to try to put ye ashore. Hold on to the rod, whatever ye do; and get a footing as fast as ye can."

"And then?" she said. "What then? What am I to do?"—for she was rather bewildered—the water still blinding her eyes, the wind choking her breath.

"Hold on to the rod—and get in what line ye can."

All this wild, rapid, breathless thing seemed to take place at once. He gave her the rod; seized hold of his oar again, and shifted it; then they seemed to be turning the bow of the boat towards a certain small promontory where some birch trees and scattered stones faced the rushing water. What was happening—or going to happen—she knew not; only that she was to hold on to the rod; and then there was a sudden grating of the bow on stones—a smash of spray over the stern—the coble wheeled round—Ronald had leapt into the water—and, before she knew where she was, he had seized her by the waist and swung her ashore—and though she fell, or rather slipped and quietly sat down on some rocks, she still clung to the rod, and she hardly had had her feet wet! This was what she knew of her own position; as for Ronald and the lad, they paid no further heed to her, for they were seeking to get the coble safe from the heavy surge; and then again she had her own affairs to attend to; for the salmon, though it was blissfully sulking after the first long rushes, might suddenly make up its mind for cantrips.

Then Ronald was by her side again—rather breathless.

"You've still got hold of him?—that's right—but give him his own time—let him alone—I don't want him in here among the stones in rough water like this."

And then he said, rather shamefacedly—

"I beg your pardon for gripping ye as I had to do—I—I thought we should have been over—and you would have got sorely wet."

"Oh, that's all right," she said—seeking in vain amid the whirling waste of waters for any sign or glimpse of the salmon. "But you—you must be very wet—why did you jump into the water?"

"Oh, that's nothing—there, let him go!—give him his own way!—now, reel in a bit—quicker—quicker—that'll do, now."

As soon as she had got the proper strain on the fish again, she held out her right hand.

"Pull off my glove, please," she said—but still with her eyes intent on the whirling waves.

Well, he unbuttoned the long gauntlet—though the leather was all saturated with water; but when he tried the fingers, he could not get them to yield at all; so he had to pull down the gauntlet over the hand, and haul off the glove by main force—then he put it in his pocket, for there was no time to waste on ceremony.

There was a sudden steady pull on the rod; and away went the reel.

"Let him go—let him go—ah, a good fish, and a clean fish too! I hope he'll tire himself out there, before we bring him in among the stones."

Moreover, the gale was abating somewhat, though the big waves still kept chasing each other in and springing high on the rocks. She became more eager about getting the fish. Hitherto, she had been rather excited and bewildered, and intent only on doing what she was bid; now the prospect of really landing the salmon had become joyful.

"But how shall we ever get him to come in here?" she said.

"He's bound to come, if the tackle holds; and I'm thinking he's well hooked, or he'd been off ere now, with all this scurrying water."

She shifted the rod to her right hand; her left arm was beginning to feel the continued strain.

"Has the other boat been out?" she asked.

"No, no," said he, and then he laughed. "It would be a fine thing if we could take back a good fish. I know well what they were thinking when we let the boat drift down the second time—they were thinking we had got the line aground, and were in trouble. And now they canna see us—it's little they're thinking that we're playing a fish."

"We" and "us" he said quite naturally; and she, also, had got into the way of calling him Ronald—as every one did.

Well, that was a long and a stiff fight with the salmon; for whenever it found that it was being towed into the shallows, away it went again, with rush on rush, so that

Miss Carry had her work cut out for her, and had every muscle of her arms and back aching.

"Twenty pounds, you'll see," she heard the lad Johnnie say to his companion; and Ronald answered him—

"I would rather than ten shillings it was."

Twenty pounds! She knew that this was rather a rarity on this loch—ten or eleven pounds being about the average; and if only she could capture this animal—in the teeth of a gale too—and go back to the others in triumph, and also with another tale to tell to Lily Selden! She put more and more strain on; she had both hands firm on the butt; her teeth were set hard. Twenty pounds! Or if the hook should give way? Or the line be cut on a stone? Or the fish break it with a spring and lash of its tail? Fortunately she knew but little of the many and heart-rending accidents that happen in salmon-fishing, so that her fears were fewer than her hopes; and at last her heart beat quickly when she saw Ronald take the clip in his hand.

But he was very cautious; and bade her take time; and spoke in an equable voice—just as if she were not growing desperate, and wondering how long her arms would hold out! Again and again, by dint of tight reeling up and putting on a deadly strain, she caught a glimpse of the salmon; and each of these times she thought she could guide it sailingly towards the spot where Ronald was crouching down by the rocks; and then again it would turn and head away and disappear—taking the line very slowly now, but still taking it. She took advantage of one of these pauses in the fight to step farther back some two or three yards; this was at Ronald's direction; and she obeyed without understanding. But soon she knew the reason; for at last the salmon seemed to come floating in without even an effort at refusal; and as she was called on to give him the butt firmly, she found she could almost drag him right up and under Ronald's arm. And then there was a loud "hurrah!" from the lad John as the big silver fish gleamed in the air; and the next second it was lying there on the withered grass and bracken. Miss Carry, indeed, was so excited that she came near to breaking the top of the rod; she forgot that the struggle was over; and still held on tightly.

"Lower the top, Miss," the lad John said, "or ye can put the rod down altogether."

Indeed he took it from her to lay it down safely, and right glad was she; for she was pretty well exhausted by this time, and fain to take a seat on one of the rocks while they proceeded to weigh the salmon with a pocket-scale.

"Seventeen pounds—and a beauty: as pretty a fish as ever I saw come out of the loch."

"Well, we've managed it, Ronald," said she, laughing, "but I don't know how. There he is—sure; but how we got him out of that hurricane I can't tell."

"There was twice I thought ye had lost him," said he gravely. "The line got desperately slack after ye jumped ashore——"

"Jumped ashore?" she said. "Seems to me I was flung ashore, like a sack of old clothes."

"But ye were not hurt?" said he, glancing quickly at her.

"No, no; not a bit—nor even wet; and if I had been, *that* is enough for anything."

"Johnnie, lad, get some rushes, and put the fish in the box. We'll have a surprise for them when we get back, I'm thinking."

"And can we get back?" she said.

"We'll try, anyway—oh yes—it's no so bad now."

But still it was a stiff pull; and they did not think it worth while to put out the line again. Miss Carry devoted her whole attention to sheltering herself from the spray; and was fairly successful. When, at length, they reached the top of the loch and landed, they were treated to a little mild sarcasm from those who had prudently remained on shore; but they said nothing; the time was not yet come.

Then came the question as to whether all of them could pull down the opposite side of the loch to the big rock; for there they would have shelter for lunch; while here in the open every gust that swooped down from the Clebrig slopes caught them in mid career. Nay, just then the wind seemed to moderate; so they made all haste into the cobles; and in due time the whole party were landed at the rock, which, with its broad ledges for seats, and its overhanging ferns,

formed a very agreeable and sheltered resort. Of course, there was but the one thing wanting. A fishing party at lunch on the shores of a Highland loch is a very picturesque thing; but it is incomplete without some beautiful silver-gleaming object in the foreground. There always is a bit of grass looking as if it were just meant for that display; and when the little plateau is empty, the picture lacks its chief point of interest.

"Well, you caught something if it wasn't a salmon," her father said, glancing at her dripping hat and hair.

"Yes, we did," she answered innocently.

"You must be wet through in spite of your waterproof. Sometimes I could not see the boat at all for the showers of spray. Did you get much shelter where you stopped?"

"Not much—a little."

"It was a pretty mad trick, your going out at all. Of course Ronald only went to please you; he must have known you hadn't a ghost of a chance in a gale like that."

"Pappa dear," said she, "there's nothing mean about me. There's many a girl I know would play it on her pa; but I'm not one of that kind. When I have three kings and a pair——"

"Stop it, Carry," said he angrily, "I'm tired of your Texas talk. What do you mean?"

"I only want to show my hand," she said sweetly; and she called aloud—"Johnnie!"

The young lad jumped up from the group that were cowering under the shelter of the stone dyke.

"Bring the fish out of the boat, please."

He went down to the coble, and got the salmon out of the well; and then, before bringing it and placing it on the grass before the young lady, he held it up in triumph for the gillies to see: the sarcasm was all the other way now.

"You see, pappa dear, you would have bet your boots against it, wouldn't you?" she remarked.

"But where did you get it?" he said, in amazement. "I was watching your boat all the time. I did not see you playing a fish."

"Because we got ashore as fast as we could, and had the fight out there. But please, pappa, don't ask me anything

more than that. I don't know what happened. The wind was choking me, and I was half blind, and the stones were slippery and moving, and—and everything was in a kind of uproar. Perhaps you don't think I did catch the salmon. If my arms could speak, they could tell you a different tale just at this minute; and I shall have a back to-morrow morning, I know that. Seventeen pounds, Ronald says; and as prettily shaped a fish as he has ever seen taken out of the lake."

"He is a handsome fish," her father admitted; and then he looked up impatiently at the wind-driven sky. "There is no doubt there are plenty of fish in the lake, if the weather would only give us a chance. But it's either a dead calm or else a raging gale. Why, just look at that!"

For at this moment a heavier gust than ever struck down on the water—and widened rapidly out—and tore the tops of the waves into spray—until a whirling gray cloud seemed to be flying over to the other shores. The noise and tumult of the squall were indescribable; and then, in five or six minutes or so, the loch began to reappear again, black and sullen, from under that mist of foam; and the wind subsided—only to keep moaning and howling as if meditating further springs. There was not much use in hurrying lunch. The gillies had comfortably lit their pipes. Two of the younger lads were trying their strength and skill at "putting the stone;" the others merely lay and looked on; an occasional glance at the loch told them they need not stir.

It was not jealousy of his daughter having caught a fish that made Mr. Hodson impatient; it was the waste of time. He could not find refuge in correspondence; he had no book with him; while gazing at scenery is a feeble substitute for salmon-fishing, if the latter be your aim. And then again the loch was very tantalising—awaking delusive hopes every few minutes. Sometimes it would become almost quiet—save for certain little black puffs of wind that fell vertically and widened and widened out; and they would be on the point of summoning the men to the cobles when, with a low growl and then a louder roar, the gale would be rushing down again, and the storm witches' white hair streaming across the suddenly darkened waters.

"'Ben Clebrig—the Hill of the Playing Trout,'" said he peevishly. "I don't believe a word of it. Why, the Celtic races were famous for giving characteristic names to places—describing the things accurately. 'The Hill of the Playing Trout!' Now, if they had called it 'The Hill of the Infernal Whirlwinds,' or 'The Hill of Blasts and Hurricanes,' or something of that kind, it would have been nearer the mark. And this very day last year, according to the list that Ronald has, they got nine salmon."

"Perhaps we may get the other eight yet, pappa," said she lightly.

And indeed, shortly after this, the day seemed to be getting a little quieter; and her father decided upon a start. The men came along to the coble. Ronald said to her—

"We will let them get well ahead of us; it's their turn now." And so he and she and the lad John remained on the shore, looking after the departing boat, and in all sincerity wishing them good luck.

Presently she said "What's that?"—for something had struck her sharply on the cheek. It was a heavy drop of rain, that a swirl of wind had sent round the side of the rock; and now she became aware that everywhere beyond their shelter there was a loud pattering, becoming every moment heavier and heavier, while the wind rose and rose into an ominous high screeching. And then all round there was a hissing and a roar; and from under the rock she looked forth on the most extraordinary phantasmagoria —for now the sheets of rain as they fell and broke on the water were caught by the angry mountain blasts and torn into spindrift, so that the whole lake seemed to be a mass of white smoke. And her father?—well, she could see something like the ghost of a boat and two or three phantom figures; but whether they were trying to fight their way, or letting everything go before the tempest, or what, she could not make out—for the whirling white rain-smoke made a mere spectral vision of them. Ronald came to her.

"That's bad luck," said he composedly.

"What?" she asked, quickly. "They are not in danger?"

"Oh no," said he. "But they've got both minnows aground, as far as I can make out."

"But what about that? why don't they throw the rods and everything overboard, and get into safety?"

"Oh, they'll try to save the minnows, I'm thinking."

And they did succeed in doing so—after a long and strenuous struggle; and then Mr. Hodson was glad to have them row him back to the shelter of the rock. Apparently his success with regard to the minnows had put him into quite a good humour.

"Carry," said he, "I'm not an obstinate man—I know when I've got enough. I will allow that this battle is too much for me. I'm going home. I'm going to walk."

"Then I will go with you, pappa," she said promptly.

"You may stay if you choose," said he. "You may stay and take my share as well as your own. But I'm going to see what newspapers the mail brought this morning; and there may be letters."

"And I have plenty to do also," said she. "I mean to call on that pretty Miss Douglas I told you of—the Doctor's daughter. And do you think she would come along and dine with us?—or must I ask her mother as well?"

"I don't know what the society rules are here," he answered. "I suspect you will have to find out."

"And Ronald—do you think he would come in and spend the evening with us? I can't find out anything about him—it's all phantom-minnows and things when he is in the boat."

"Well, I should like that too," said he: for he could not forsake the theories which he had so frequently propounded to her.

And so they set forth for the inn, leaving the men to get the boats back when they could; and after a long and brave battling with rain and wind they achieved shelter at last. And then Miss Carry had to decide what costume would be most appropriate for an afternoon call in the Highlands—on a day filled with pulsating hurricanes. Her bodice of blue with its regimental gold braid she might fairly adopt—for it could be covered over and protected; but her James I. hat with its gray and saffron plumes she had to discard—she had no wish to see it suddenly whirling away in the direction of Ben Loyal.

CHAPTER XVI.

DREAMS AND VISIONS.

Miss Hodson was in no kind of anxiety or embarrassment about this visit; she had quite sufficient reliance on her own tact; and when, going along to the Doctor's cottage, she found Meenie alone in that little room of hers, she explained the whole situation very prettily and simply and naturally. Two girls thrown together in this remote and solitary place, with scarcely any one else to talk with; why should they not know each other? That was the sum and substance of her appeal; with a little touch here and there about her being a stranger, and not sure of the ways and customs of this country that she found herself in. And then Meenie, who was perhaps a trifle overawed at first by this resplendent visitor, was almost inclined to smile at the notion that any apology was necessary, and said in her gentle and quiet way—

"Oh, but it is very kind of you. And if you had lived in one or two Scotch parishes, you would know that the minister's family and the doctor's family are supposed to know every one."

She did not add "and be at every one's disposal"—for that might have seemed a little rude. However, the introduction was over and done with; and Miss Carry set herself to work to make herself agreeable—which she could do very easily when she liked. As yet she kept the invitation to dinner in the background; talked of all kinds of things—the salmon-fishing, the children's soirée she had heard of; Ronald; Ronald's brother the minister; and her wonder that Ronald should be content with his present position; and always those bright dark eyes seemed to be scanning everything in the room with a pleased curiosity, and then again and again returning to Meenie's face, and her dress, and her way of wearing her hair, with a frank scrutiny which made the country mouse not a little shy in the presence of this ornate town mouse. For Miss Carry, with her upper wrappings discarded, was not only very prettily attired, but also she had about her all kinds of

nick-nacks and bits of finery that seemed to have come from many lands, and to add to her foreign look. Of course, a woman's glance—even the glance of a shy Highland girl—takes note of these things; and they seemed but part of the unusual character and appearance of this stranger, who seemed so delicate and fragile, and yet was full of an eager vivacity and talkativeness, and whose soft, large, black eyes, if they seemed to wander quickly and restlessly from one object to another, were clearly so full of kindness and a wish to make friends. And very friendly indeed she was; and she had nothing but praise for the Highlands, and Highland scenery, and Highland manners, and even the Highland accent.

"I suppose I have an accent myself; but of course I don't know it," she rattled on. "Even at home they say our western accent is pretty bad. Well, I suppose I have got it; but anyway I am not ashamed of it, and I am not in a hurry to change it. I have heard of American girls in Europe who were most afraid to speak lest they should be found out—*found out!* Why, I don't see that English girls try to hide their accent, or want to copy any one else; and I don't see why American girls should be ashamed of having an American accent. Your accent, now; I have been trying to make out what it is, but I can't. It is very pretty; and not the least like the English way of talking; but I can't just make out where the difference is."

For this young lady had a desperately direct way of addressing any one. She seemed to perceive no atmosphere of conventionality between person and person; it was brain to brain, direct; and no pausing to judge of the effect of sentences.

"I know my mother says that I speak in the Highland way," Meenie said, with a smile.

"There now, I declare," said Miss Hodson, "that did not sound like an English person speaking, and yet I could not tell you where the difference was. I really think it is more manner than accent. The boatmen and the girls at the inn—they all speak as if they were anxious to please you."

"Then it cannot be a very disagreeable accent," said Meenie, laughing in her quiet way.

"No, no; I like it. I like it very much. Ronald now,

has nothing of that; he is positive and dogmatic—I would say gruff in his way of talking, if he was not so obliging. But he is very obliging and good-natured; there is just nothing he won't do for us—and we are perfect strangers to him."

And so she prattled on, apparently quite satisfied that now they were good friends; while Meenie had almost forgotten her shyness in the interest with which she listened to this remarkable young lady who had been all over the world and yet took her travelling so much as a matter of course. Then Miss Hodson said—

"You know my father and I soon exhaust our remarks on the events of the day when we sit down to dinner; and we were wondering whether you would take pity on our solitude and come along and dine with us this evening. Will you? I wish you would—it would be just too kind of you."

Meenie hesitated.

"I would like very well," said she, "but—but my mother and the lad have driven away to Tongue to fetch my father home—and it may be late before they are back——"

"The greater reason why you should come—why, to think of your sitting here alone! I will come along for you myself. And if you are afraid of having too much of the star-spangled banner, we'll get somebody else in who is not an American; I mean to ask Ronald if he will come in and spend the evening with us—or come in to dinner as well, if he has time——"

Now the moment she uttered these words she perceived the mistake she had made. Meenie all at once looked troubled, conscious, apprehensive—there was a touch of extra colour in her face: perhaps she was annoyed that she was betraying this embarrassment.

"I think some other night, if you please," the girl said, in a low voice, and with her eyes cast down, "some other night, when mamma is at home—I would like to ask her first."

"Class distinctions," said Miss Carry to herself, as she regarded this embarrassment with her observant eyes. "Fancy class distinctions in a little community like this—in mid-winter too! Of course the Doctor's daughter

must not sit down to dinner with Lord Ailine's head keeper."

But she could not offer to leave Ronald out—that would but have added to the girl's confusion, whatever was the cause of it. She merely said lightly—

"Very well, then, some other evening you will take pity on us—and I hope before I go to Paris. And then I want you to let me come in now and again and have a cup of tea with you; and I get all the illustrated periodicals sent me from home—with the fashion-plates, you know."

She rose.

"What a nice room—it is all your own, I suppose?"

"Oh yes: that is why it is so untidy."

"But I like to see a room look as if it was being used. Well, now, what are these?" she said, going to the mantel-shelf, where a row of bottles stood.

"These are medicines."

"Why, you don't look sick," the other said, turning suddenly.

"Oh no. These are a few simple things that my father leaves with me when he goes from home—they are for children mostly—and the people have as much faith in me as in anybody," Meenie said, with a shy laugh. "Papa says I can't do any harm with them, in any case; and the people are pleased."

"Hush, hush, dear, you must not tell me any secrets of that kind," said Miss Carry gravely; and then she proceeded to get on her winter wraps.

Meenie went downstairs with her, and at the door would see that she was all properly protected and buttoned up about the throat.

"For it is very brave of you to come into Sutherlandshire in the winter," said she; "we hardly expect to see any one until the summer is near at hand."

"Then you will let me come and have some tea with you at times, will you not?"

"Oh yes—if you will be so kind."

They said good-bye and shook hands; and then Miss Carry thought that Meenie looked so pretty and so shy, and had so much appealing gentleness and friendliness in the clear, transparent, timid blue-gray eyes, that she kissed her,

and said "Good-bye, dear," again, and went out into the dusk and driving wind of the afternoon, entirely well pleased with her visit.

But it seemed as though she were about to be disappointed in both directions; for when she called in at Ronald's cottage he was not there; and when she returned to the inn, he was not to be found, nor could any one say whither he had gone. She and her father dined by themselves. She did not say why Meenie had declined to come along and join them; but she had formed her own opinion on that point; and the more she thought of it, the more absurd it seemed to her that this small handful of people living all by themselves in the solitude of the mountains should think it necessary to observe social distinctions. Was not Ronald, she asked herself, fit to associate with any one? But then she remembered that the Highlanders were said to be very proud of their descent; and she had heard something about Glengask and Orosay; and she resolved that in the future she would be more circumspect in the matter of invitations.

About half-past eight or so the pretty Nelly appeared with the message that Ronald was in the inn, and had heard that he was being asked for.

"What will I tell him ye want, sir?" she said, naturally assuming that Ronald was to be ordered to do something.

"Give him my compliments," said Mr. Hodson, "and say we should be obliged if he would come in and smoke a pipe and have a chat with us, if he has nothing better to do."

But Nelly either thought this was too much politeness to be thrown away on the handsome keeper, or else she had some small private quarrel with him; for all she said to him, and that brusquely, was—

"Ronald, you're wanted in the parlour."

Accordingly, when he came along the passage, and tapped at the door and opened it, he stood there uncertain, cap in hand. Mr. Hodson had to repeat the invitation—explaining that they had wanted him to have some dinner with them, but that he could not be found; and then Ronald, with less of embarrassment than might have been expected—for he knew these two people better now—shut the door, and laid down his cap, and modestly advanced to the chair that Mr. Hodson had drawn in towards one side of the big

fireplace. Miss Carry was seated apart on a sofa, apparently engaged in some sort of knitting work; but her big black eyes could easily be raised when there was need, and she could join in the conversation when she chose.

At first that was mostly about the adjacent shooting, which Mr. Hodson thought of taking for a season merely by way of experiment; and the question was how long he would in that case have to be away from his native country. This naturally took them to America, and eventually and alas! to politics—which to Miss Carry was but as the eating of chopped straw. However, Mr. Hodson (if you could keep the existence of lords out of his reach) was no very violent polemic; and moreover, whenever the Bird of Freedom began to clap its wings too loudly, was there not on the sofa there a not inattentive young lady to interfere with a little gentle sarcasm? Sometimes, indeed, her interpositions were both uncalled for and unfair; and sometimes they were not quite clearly intelligible. When, for example, they were talking of the colossal statue of Liberty enlightening the World which the French Republic proposed to present to the American Republic to be set up in New York Bay, she pretended not to know in which direction—east or west—the giant figure was to extend her light and liberty giving arm; and her objection to her father's definition of the caucus system as a despotism tempered by bolting, was a still darker saying of which Ronald could make nothing whatever. But what of that? Whatever else was veiled to him, this was clear—that her interference was on his behalf, so that he should not be overpressed in argument or handicapped for lack of information; and he was very grateful to her, naturally; and far from anxious to say anything against a country that had sent him so fair and so generous an ally.

But, after all, was not this laudation of the institutions of the United States meant only as a kindness—as an inducement to him to go thither, and better his position? There was the field where the race was to the swiftest, where the best man got to the front, and took the prize which he had fairly won. There no accident of birth, no traditional usage, was a hindrance. The very largeness of the area gave to the individual largeness of view.

"Yes," said Miss Carry (but they took no heed of her

impertinence) "in our country a bar-tender mixes drinks with his mind fixed on Niagara."

Nay, the very effort to arouse dissatisfaction in the bosom of this man who seemed all too well contented with his circumstances was in itself meant as a kindness. Why should he be content? Why should he not get on? It was all very well to have health and strength and high spirits, and to sing tenor songs, and be a favourite with the farm-lasses; but that could not last for ever. He was throwing away his life. His chances were going by him. Why, at his age, what had so-and-so done, and what had so-and-so not done? And how had they started? What did they owe to fortune —what, rather, to their own resolution and brain?

"Ronald, my good fellow," said his Mentor, in the most kindly way, "if I could only get you to breathe the atmosphere of Chicago for a fortnight, I am pretty sure you wouldn't come back to stalk deer and train dogs for Lord Ailine or any other lordship."

Miss Carry said nothing; but she pictured to herself Ronald passing down Madison Street—no longer, of course, in his weather-tanned stalking costume, but attired as the other young gentlemen to be found there; and going into Burke's Hotel for an oyster luncheon; and coming out again chewing a toothpick; and strolling on to the Grand Pacific to look at the latest telegrams. And she smiled (though, indeed, she herself had not been behindhand in urging him to get out of his present estate and better his fortunes), for there was something curiously incongruous in that picture; and she was quite convinced that in Wabash Avenue he would not look nearly as handsome nor so much at his ease as now he did.

"I am afraid," said he, with a laugh, "if ye put me down in a place like that, I should be sorely at a loss to tell what to turn my hand to. It's rather late in the day for me to begin and learn a new trade."

"Nonsense, man," the other said. "You have the knowledge already, if you only knew how to apply it."

"The knowledge?" Ronald repeated, with some surprise. Most of his book-reading had been in the field of English poetry; and he did not see how he could carry that to market.

Mr. Hodson took out his note-book; and began to look over the leaves.

"And you don't need to go as far as Chicago, if you would rather not," said he.

"If you do," said Miss Carry flippantly, "mind you don't eat any of our pork. Pappa dear, do you know why a wise man doesn't eat pork in Illinois? Don't you know? It is because there is a trichinosis worth two of that."

Ronald laughed; but her father was too busy to attend to such idiotcy.

"Even if you would rather remain in the old country," he continued, "and enjoy an out-of-door life, why should you not make use of what you already know? I have heard you talk about the draining of soil, and planting of trees, and so on: well, look here now. I have been inquiring into that matter; and I find that the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland grants certificates for proficiency in the theory and practice of forestry. Why shouldn't you try to gain one of those certificates; and then apply for the post of land-steward? I'll bet you could manage an estate as well as most of them who are at it—especially one of those Highland sporting estates. And then you would become a person of importance; and not be at any lordship's beck and call; you would have an opportunity of beginning to make a fortune, if not of making one at once; and if you wanted to marry, there would be a substantial future for you to look to."

"And then you would come over and see us at Chicago," said Miss Carry. "We live on North Park Avenue; and you would not feel lonely for want of a lake to look at—we've a pretty big one there."

"But the first step—about the certificate?" said Ronald doubtfully—though, indeed, the interest that these two kindly people showed in him was very delightful, and he was abundantly grateful, and perhaps also a trifle bewildered by these ambitious and seductive dreams.

"Well, I should judge that would be easy enough," continued Mr. Hodson, again referring to his note-book in that methodical, slow-mannered way of his. "You would have to go to Edinburgh or Glasgow, and attend some classes, I should imagine, for they want you to know some-

thing of surveying and geology and chemistry and botany. Some of these you could read up here—for you have plenty of leisure, and the subjects are just at your hand. I don't see any difficulty about that. I suppose you have saved something now, that you could maintain yourself when you were at the classes?"

"I could manage for a while," was the modest answer.

"I have myself several times thought of buying an estate in the Highlands," Mr. Hodson continued, "if I found that I have not forgotten altogether how to handle a gun; and if I did so, I would give you the management right off. But it would not do for you to risk such a chance; what you want is to qualify yourself, so that you can take your stand on your own capacity, and demand the market value for it."

Well, it was a flattering proposal; and this calm, shrewd-headed man seemed to consider it easily practicable—and as the kind of thing that a young man in his country would naturally make for and achieve; while the young lady on the sofa had now thrown aside the pretence of knitting, and was regarding him with eloquent eyes, and talking as if it were all settled and attained, and Ronald already become an enterprising and prosperous manager, whom they should come to see when they visited Scotland, and who was certainly to be their guest when he crossed the Atlantic. No wonder his head was turned. Everything seemed so easy—why, both she and her father appeared to be surrounded, when at home, with men who had begun with nothing and made fortunes. And then he would not be torn away altogether from the hills. He might still have a glimpse of the dun deer from time to time; there would still be the dewy mornings by lake and strath and mountain-tarn, with the stumbling on a bit of white heather, and the picking it and wearing it for luck. And if he had to bid farewell to Clebrig and Ben Loyal and Ben Hope and Bonnie Strath-Naver—well, there were other districts far more beautiful than that, as well he knew, where he would still hear the curlew whistle, and the grouse-cock crow in the evening, and the great stags bellow their challenge through the mists of the dawn. And as for a visit to Chicago?—and a view of great cities, and harbours, and

the wide activities of the world?—surely all that was a wonderful dream, if only it might come true!

"I'm sure I beg your pardon," said he, rising, "for letting ye talk all this time about my small affairs. I think you'll have a quieter day to-morrow; the wind has backed to the east; and that is a very good wind for this loch. And I've brought the minnows that I took to mend; the kelts are awful beasts for destroying the minnows."

He put the metal box on the mantelpiece. They would have had him stay longer—and Miss Carry, indeed, called reproaches down on her head that she had not asked him to smoke nor offered him any kind of hospitality—but he begged to be excused. And so he went out and got home through the cold dark night—to his snug little room and the peat-fire, and his pipe and papers and meditations.

A wonderful dream, truly—and all to be achieved by the reading up of a few subjects of some of which he already knew more than a smattering. And why should he not try? It seemed the way of the world—at least, of the world of which he had been learning so much from these strangers—to strive and push forward and secure, if possible, means and independence. Why should he remain at Inver-Mudal? The old careless happiness had fled from it. Meenie had passed him twice now—each time merely giving him a formal greeting, and yet, somehow, as he imagined, with a timid trouble in her eyes, as if she was sorry to do that. Her superintendence of Maggie's lessons was more restricted now; and never by any chance did she come near the cottage when he was within or about. The old friendliness was gone; the old happy companionship—however restricted and respectful on his side; the old, frank appeal for his aid and counsel when any of her own small schemes had to be undertaken. And was she in trouble on his account?—and had the majesty of Glengask and Orosay been invoked? Well, that possibility need harrow no human soul. If his acquaintanceship—or companionship, in a measure—with Meenie was considered undesirable, there was an easy way out of the difficulty. Acquaintanceship or companionship, whichever it might be, it would end—it had ended.

And then again, he said to himself, as he sate at the

little table and turned over those leaves that contained many a gay morning song and many a midnight musing—but all about Meenie, and the birds and flowers and hills and streams that knew her—soon she would be away from Inver-Mudal, and what would the place be like then? Perhaps when the young corn was springing she would take her departure; and what would the world be like when she had left? He could see her seated in the little carriage; her face not quite so bright and cheerful as usually it was; her eyes—that were sometimes as blue as a speedwell in June, and sometimes gray like the luminous clear gray of the morning sky—perhaps clouded a little; and the sensitive lips trembling? The children would be there, to bid her good-bye. And then away through the lonely glens she would go, by hill and river and wood, till they came in sight of the western ocean, and Loch Inver, and the great steamer to carry her to the south. Meenie would be away—and Inver-Mudal, *then?*

Small birds in the corn
Are cowering and quailing:
O my lost love,
Whence are you sailing?

Fierce the gale blows
Adown the bleak river;
The valley is empty
For ever and ever.

Out on the seas,
The night winds are wailing:
O my lost love,
Whence are you sailing?

CHAPTER XVII.

A FURTHER DISCOVERY.

It can hardly be wondered at that these suddenly presented ambitious projects—this call to be up and doing, and getting forward in the general race of the world—should add a new interest and fascination, in his eyes, to the society of the American father and daughter who had wandered into these distant wilds. And perhaps, after all, he had been merely wasting his time and throwing away his life?

That solitary, contented, healthy and happy existence was a mistake—an idle dream—an anachronism, even? The common way of the world was right; and that, as he heard of it in the echoes brought by these strangers from without, was all a pushing and striving and making the most of opportunities, until the end was reached—independence and ease and wealth; the power of choosing this or that continent for a residence; the radiant happiness and glow of success. And then it all seemed so easy and practicable when he heard these two talking about their friends and the fortunes they had made; and it seemed still more easy—and a far more desirable and beautiful thing—when it was Miss Carry herself who was speaking, she seated alone in the stern of the boat, her eyes—that had a kind of surface darkness and softness, like blackberries wet with rain—helping out her speech, and betraying an open friendliness, and even conferring a charm on her descriptions of that far-off pork-producing city of the west. Mr. Hodson, as he sate upright in his easy-chair before the fire, spoke slowly and sententiously, and without any visible enthusiasm; Miss Carry, in the stern of the coble, her face all lit up with the blowing winds and the sunlight, talked with far greater vivacity, and was obviously deeply interested in the future of her companion. And it had come to this now, that, as she sate opposite him, he quite naturally and habitually regarded her eyes as supplementing her meaning; he no longer rather shrank from the directness of her look; he no longer wished that she would sit the other way, and attend to the tops of the salmon-rods. As for their speech together, the exceeding frankness of it and lack of conventionality arose from one or two causes, but no doubt partly from this—that during their various adventures on the loch there was no time for the observance of studied forms. It was "Do this" and "Do that," on his part—sometimes with even a sharp word of monition; and with her it was "Will that do, Ronald?" or again,—when she was standing up in fell encounter with her unseen enemy, both hands engaged with the rod—"Ronald, tie my cap down, or the wind will blow it away—No, no, the other strings—underneath!"

Indeed, on the morning after the evening on which they had been urging him to make a career for himself,

there was not much chance of any calm discussion of that subject. The proceedings of the day opened in a remarkably lively manner. For one thing the wind had backed still farther during the night, and was now blowing briskly from the north, bringing with it from time to time smart snow showers that blackened the heavens and earth for a few minutes and then sped on, leaving the peaks and shoulders and even the lower spurs of the hills all a gleaming white in the wintry sunlight.

"Salmon-fishing in a snow-storm—well, I declare!" said she, as she stood on the shore of the lake, watching him putting the rods together.

"The very best time," said he, in his positive way (for he had assumed a kind of authority over her, whereas with Meenie he was always reserved and distant and timidly gentle). "None better. I would just like to find a foot of snow on the ground, right down to the edge of the loch; and the flakes falling so thick ye couldna see a dozen yards ahead of ye."

"Do you know where I should be then?" she retorted. "I should be warming my toes in front of Mrs. Murray's peat-fire."

"Not one bit," said he, just as positively. "If ye heard the salmon were taking, ye'd be down here fast enough, I'm thinking."

And presently it seemed as if this early start of theirs was to be rewarded, for scarcely were both lines out—and Miss Carry was just settling herself down for a little quiet talk, and was pulling the collar of her ulster higher over her ears (for the wind was somewhat cold)—when a sudden tugging and straining at one of the rods, followed by a sharp scream of the reel, upset all these little plans. She made a dash at the rod and raised it quickly.

"That's a good fish—that's a good fish!" Ronald cried, with his mouth set hard. "Now let's see if we canna hold on to this one. Let him go, lassie!—I beg your pardon—let him go—let him go—that's right—a clean fish, and a beauty!"

Beauty or no, the salmon had no hesitation about showing himself, at least; for now he began to lash the surface of the water, some fifty yards away, not springing into the

air, but merely beating the waves with head and body and tail to get rid of this unholy thing that he had pursued and gripped. Then down he went with a mighty plunge—the reel whirring out its shrill cry, and Miss Carry's gloves suffering in consequence—and there he sulked; so that they backed the boat again, and again she got in some of the line. What was the sound that came across the lake to them, in the face of the northerly wind?

"They're waving a handkerchief to ye, Miss Hodson," said he, "from the other boat."

"Oh, bother," said she (for the strain of a heavy salmon and forty yards of line was something on her arms), "here, take the handkerchief from this breast-pocket, and wave it back to them—stand up beside me—they won't see the difference——"

He did as he was bid; apparently she paid little attention; she seemed wholly bent on getting the fish. And clearly the salmon had somewhat exhausted himself with his first escapades; he now lay deep down, not stirring an inch; so that she got in her line until there was not more than twenty yards out: then they waited.

And meanwhile this strange thing that was overtaking them? The bright, windy, changeable day, with its gleaming snow-slopes and sunlit straths and woods darkened by passing shadows—seemed to be slowly receding from them, and around them came a kind of hushed and stealthy gloom. And then the wind stirred again; the gusts came sharper and colder; here and there a wet particle stung the cheek or the back of the hand. Of course, she was in a death-struggle with a salmon; she could not heed. And presently the gathering blackness all around seemed to break into a soft bewilderment of snow; large, soft, woolly flakes came driving along before the wind; all the world was shut out from them; they could see nothing but a short space of livid dark water, and feel nothing but this choking silent thing in the air. And then again, with a magical rapidity, the heavens and the earth seemed to open above and around them; the clouds swept on; there was a great deep of dazzling blue suddenly revealed in the sky overhead; and all the dancing waters of the lake, from the boat to the farthest shores, were one flashing and lapping

mass of keen, pure cobalt, absolutely bewildering to the eyes. The joy of that radiant colour, after the mystery and the darkness! And then the sunlight broke out; and Clebrig had a touch of gold along his mighty shoulders; and Ben Loyal's snow-slopes were white against the brilliant blue; and it seemed as if the fairest of soft summer skies were shining over Bonnie Strath-Naver.

To her it meant that she could see a little more clearly. She shook the snowflakes from her hair.

"Ronald, you are sure it is not a kelt?"

"Indeed I am. There's nothing of the kelt about that one."

"If it is," said she, "I'll go home and tell my ma."

She was clearly feeling a little more secure about this one. And she did capture the creature in the end, though it was after a long and arduous struggle. For he was a strong fish—fresh run up from the sea, and heavy for his size; and again and again, and a dozen times repeated, he would make rushes away from the boat just as they thought he was finally showing the white feather. It was the toughest fight she had had; but practice was hardening her muscles a little; and she had acquired a little dexterity in altering her position and shifting the strain. By this time the other boat was coming round.

"Stick to him, Carry!" her father cried. "No Secesh tactics allowed: hold on to him!"

The next moment Ronald had settled all that by a smart scoop of the clip; and there in the bottom of the boat lay a small-headed deep-shouldered fish of just over sixteen pounds—Ronald pinning him down to get the minnow out of his jaw, and the lad Johnnie grinning all over his ruddy face with delight.

Miss Carry looked on in a very calm and business-like fashion; though in reality her heart was beating quickly—with gladness and exultation. And then, with the same business-like calmness, she took from the deep pocket of her ulster a flask that she had borrowed from Mr. Murray.

"Ronald," said she, "you must drink to our good luck."

She handed him the flask. She appeared to be quite to the manner born now. You would not have imagined

that her heart was beating so quickly, or her hands just a little bit nervous and shaky after that prolonged excitement.

Good luck seemed to follow the Duke's boat this morning. Within the next three quarters of an hour they had got hold of another salmon—just over ten pounds. And it was barely lunch time when they had succeeded in landing a third—this time a remarkably handsome fish of fifteen pounds. She now thought she had done enough. She resumed her seat contentedly; there was no elation visible on her face. But she absolutely forbade the putting out of the lines again.

"Look here, Ronald," she said seriously. "What do you think I came here for? Do you think I came here to leave my bones in a foreign land? I am just about dead now. My arms are not made of steel. We can go ashore, and get lunch unpacked; the other boat will follow quickly enough. I tell you my arms and wrists have just had about enough for one morning."

And a very snug and merry little luncheon-party they made there—down by the side of the lapping water, and under the shelter of a wood of young birch-trees. For the other boat had brought ashore two salmon; so that the five handsome fish, laid side by side on a broad slab of rock, made an excellent show. Miss Carry said nothing about her arms aching; but she did not seem to be in as great a hurry as the others to set to work again. No; she enjoyed the rest; and, observing that Ronald had finished his lunch, she called to him, under the pretext of wanting to know something about sending the fish south. This led on to other things; the three of them chatting together contentedly enough, and Ronald even making bold enough to light his pipe. A very friendly little group this was—away by themselves there in these wintry solitudes—with the wide blue waters of the lake in front of them, and the snows of Clebrig white against the sky. And if he were to go away from these familiar scenes, might he not come back again in the after days? And with the splendid power of remaining or going, just as he pleased?—just as these friendly folk could, who spoke so lightly of choosing this or that quarter of the globe for their temporary habitation? Yes,

there were many things that money could do: these two strangers, now, could linger here at Inver-Mudal just as long as the salmon-fishing continued to amuse them; or they could cross over to Paris, and see the wonders there; or they could go away back to the great cities and harbours and lakes and huge hotels that they spoke so much about. He listened with intensest interest, and with a keen imagination. And was this part of the shore around them—with its rocks and brushwood and clear water—really like the shores of Lake George, where she was so afraid of rattlesnakes? She said she would send him some photographs of Lake Michigan.

Then in the boat in the afternoon she quite innocently remarked that she wished he was going back home with them; for that he would find the voyage across the Atlantic so amusing. She described the people coming out to say good-bye at Liverpool; and the throwing of knives and pencil-cases and what not as farewell gifts from the steamer to the tender, and *vice versâ;* she described the scamper round Queenstown and the waiting for the mails; then the long days on the wide ocean, with all the various occupations, and the concerts in the evening, and the raffles in the smoking-room (this from hearsay); then the crowding on deck for the first glimpse of the American coast-line; and the gliding over the shallows of Sandy Hook; and the friends who would come steaming down the Bay to wave handkerchiefs and welcome them home. She seemed to regard it as a quite natural and simple thing that he should be of this party; and that, after landing, her father should take him about and "see him through," as it were: and if her fancy failed to carry out these forecasts, and to picture him walking along Dearborn Avenue or driving out with them to Washington Park, it was that once or twice ere now she had somehow arrived at the notion that Ronald Strang and Chicago would prove to be incongruous. Or was it some instinctive feeling that, however natural and fitting their friendship might be in this remote little place in the Highlands, it might give rise to awkwardness over there? Anyhow, that could not prevent her father from seeing that Ronald had ample introductions and guidance when he landed at New York; and was not

that the proper sphere for one of his years and courage and abilities?

When they got ashore at the end of the day it was found that each boat had got two more salmon, so that there was a display of nine big fish on the grass there in the gathering dusk.

"And to think that I should live to catch five salmon in one day," said Miss Carry, as she contemplated her share of the spoil. "Well, no one will believe it; for they're just real mean people at home; and they won't allow that any thing's happened to you in Europe unless you have something to show for it. I suppose Ronald would give me a written guarantee. Anyway, I am going to take that big one along to the Doctor—it will be a good introduction, won't it, pappa?"

But a curious thing happened about that same salmon. When they got to the inn the fish were laid out on the stone flags of the dairy—the coolest and safest place for them in the house; and Miss Carry, who had come along to see them, when she wanted anything done, naturally turned to Ronald.

"Ronald," said she, "I want to give that big one to Mrs. Douglas, and I am going along now to the cottage. Will you carry it for me?"

He said something about getting a piece of string and left. A couple of minutes thereafter the lad Johnnie appeared, with a stout bit of cord in his hand; and he, having affixed that to the head and the tail of the salmon, caught it up, and stood in readiness. She seemed surprised.

"Where is Ronald?" said she—for he was always at her bidding.

"He asked me to carry the fish to the Doctor's house, mem," said the lad. "Will I go now?"

Moreover, this salmon was accidentally responsible for a still further discovery. When Miss Carry went along to call on the Douglases, little Maggie was with her friend Meenie; and they all of them had tea together; and when the little Maggie considered it fitting she should go home, Miss Carry said she would accompany her—for it was now quite dark. And they had a good deal of talk by the way,

partly about schooling and accomplishments, but much more largely about Ronald, who was the one person in all the world in the eyes of his sister. And if Maggie was ready with her information, this pretty young lady was equally interested in receiving it, and also in making inquiries. And thus it came about that Miss Carry now for the first time learned that Ronald was in the habit of writing poems, verses, and things of that kind; and that they were greatly thought of by those who had seen them or to whom he had sent them.

"Why, I might have guessed as much," she said to herself, as she walked on alone to the inn—though what there was in Ronald's appearance to suggest that he was a writer of rhymes it might have puzzled any one to determine.

But this was a notable discovery; and it set her quick and fertile brain working in a hundred different ways; but mostly she bethought her of one John C. Huysen and of a certain newspaper-office on Fifth Avenue, Chicago, Ill.

"Well, there," she said to herself, as the result of these rapid cogitations, "if Jack Huysen's good for anything—if he wants to say he has done me a service—if he wants to show he has the spirit of a man in him—well, *now's his chance.*"

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONFESSIONS.

It was but another instance of the curiously magnetic influence of this man's personality that she instantly and unhesitatingly assumed that what he wrote must be of value. Now every second human being, as well she knew, writes verses at one period of his life, and these are mostly trash; and remain discreetly hidden, or are mercifully burned. But what Ronald wrote, she was already certain, must be characteristic of himself, and have interest and definite worth; and what better could she do than get hold of some of these things, and have them introduced to the public, perhaps with some little preliminary encomium written by a friendly hand? She had heard from the little Maggie

that Ronald had never sent any of his writings to the newspapers; might not this be a service? She could not offer him a sovereign because he happened to be in the boat when she caught her first salmon; but fame—the appeal to the wide-reading public—the glory of print? Nay, might they not be of some commercial value also? She knew but little of the customs of the Chicago journals, but she guessed that a roundabout hint conveyed to Mr. John C. Huysen would not be without effect. And what were the subjects, she asked herself, that Ronald wrote about? In praise of deerstalking, for one thing, and mountain-climbing, and out-of-door life, she felt assured: you could see it in his gait and in his look; you could hear it in his laugh and his singing as he went along the road. Politics, perhaps—if sarcastic verses were in his way; for there was a sharp savour running through his talk; and he took abundant interest in public affairs. Or perhaps he would be for recording the charms of some rustic maiden—some "Jessie, the Flower o' Dumblane"—some blue-eyed and rather silent and uninteresting young person, living alone in a glen, and tending cattle or hanging out things to dry on a hedge? Well, even a song would be something. The *Chicago Citizen* might not pay very much for it, but the great and generous public might take kindly to it; and if Jack Huysen did not say something friendly about it, then she would know the reason why.

But the stiffest struggle Miss Carry ever had with any salmon was mere child's play compared with the fight she had with Ronald himself over this matter. At first he was exceedingly angry that she should have been told; but then he laughed, and said to her that there were plenty of folk in Scotland as elsewhere who wrote idle verses, but that they had the common sense to say nothing about it. If she wanted a memento of her stay in the Highlands to take back with her to America, he would give her her choice of the deer-skins he had in the shed; that would be appropriate, and she was welcome to the best of them; but as for scribblings and nonsense of that kind—no, no. On the other hand she was just as persistent, and treated him to a little gentle raillery, wondering that he had not yet outgrown the years of shyness; and finally, when everything

else had failed, putting her request as a grace and courtesy to be granted to an American stranger. This was hardly fair; but she was very anxious about the matter; and she knew that her demand was founded far less on mere curiosity than on an honest desire to do him a service.

Of course he yielded; and a terrible time he had of it the night he set about selecting something to show to her. For how could she understand the circumstances in which these random things were written—these idle fancies of a summer morning—these careless love songs—these rhymed epistles in which the practical common sense and shrewd advice were much more conspicuous than any graces of art? And then again so many of them were about Meenie; and these were forbidden; the praise of Meenie—even when it was the birds and the roses and the foxgloves and the summer rills that sang of her—was not for alien eyes. But at last he lit upon some verses supposed to convey the sentiments of certain exiles met together on New Year's night in Nova Scotia; and he thought it was a simple kind of thing; at all events it would get him out of a grievous difficulty. So—for the lines had been written many a day ago, and came upon him now with a new aspect—he altered a phrase here or there, by way of passing the time; and finally he made a fair copy. The next morning, being a Sunday, he espied Miss Carry walking down towards the river; and he overtook her and gave her this little piece to redeem his pledge.

"It's not worth much," said he, "but you'll understand what it is about. Burn it when you've read it—that's all I ask of ye——" Then on he went, glad not to be cross-questioned, the faithful Harry trotting at his heels.

So she sat down on the stone parapet of the little bridge—on this hushed, still, shining morning that was quite summer-like in its calm—and opened the paper with not a little curiosity. And well enough she understood the meaning of the little piece: she knew that the Mackays* used to live about here; and was not Strath-Naver but a few miles off; and this the very Mudal river running underneath the bridge on which she was sitting?

* Pronounced *Mackise*, with the accent on the second syllable.

But here are the verses she read—and he had entitled them

ACROSS THE SEA.

In Nova Scotia's clime they've met
To keep the New Year's night;
The merry lads and lasses crowd
Around the blazing light.

But father and mother sit withdrawn
To let their fancies flee
To the old, old time, and the old, old home
That's far across the sea.

And what strange sights and scenes are these
That sadden their shaded eyes?
Is it only thus they can see again
The land of the Mackays?

O there the red-deer roam at will;
And the grouse whirr on the wing;
And the curlew call, and the ptarmigan
Drink at the mountain spring;

And the hares lie snug on the hillside;
And the lusty blackcock crows;
But the river the children used to love
Through an empty valley flows.

Do they see again a young lad wait
To shelter with his plaid,
When she steals to him in the gathering dusk,
His gentle Highland maid?

Do they hear the pipes at the weddings;
Or the low sad funeral wail
As the boat goes out to the island,
And the pibroch tells its tale?

O fair is Naver's strath, and fair
The strath that Mudal laves;
And dear the haunts of our childhood,
And dear the old folks' graves;

And the parting from one's native land
Is a sorrow hard to dree:
God's forgiveness to them that sent us
So far across the sea!

And is bonnie Strath-Naver shining,
As it shone in the bygone years?—
As it shines for us now—ay, ever—
Though our eyes are blind with tears.

Well, her own eyes were moist—though that was but for a moment; for when she proceeded to walk slowly and meditatively back to the inn, her mind was busy with many things; and she began to think that she had not got any way near to the understanding of this man, whom she had treated in so familiar a fashion, as boatman, and companion, and gillie—almost as valet. What lay behind those eyes of his, that glowed with so strange a light at times, and seemed capable of reading her through and through, only that the slightly tremulous eyelids came down and veiled them, or that he turned away his head? And why this strain of pathos in a nature that seemed essentially joyous and glad and careless? Not only that, but in the several discussions with her father—occasionally becoming rather warm, indeed—Ronald had been invariably on the side of the landlord, as was naturally to be expected. He had insisted that the great bulk of the land given over to deer was of no possible use to any other living creature; he had maintained the right of the landlord to clear any portion of his property of sheep and forest it, if by so doing he could gain an increase of rental; he had even maintained the right of the landlord to eject non-paying tenants from holdings clearly not capable of supporting the ever-increasing families; and so forth. But was his feeling, after all, with the people—he himself being one of the people? His stout championship of the claims and privileges of Lord Ailine—that was not incompatible with a deeper sense of the cruelty of driving the poor people away from the land of their birth and the home of their childhood? His natural sentiment as a man was not to be overborne by the fact that he was officially a dependent on Lord Ailine? These and a good many other curious problems concerning him—and concerning his possible future—occupied her until she had got back to the snug little parlour; and there, as she found her father seated in front of the blazing fire, and engaged in getting through the mighty pile of newspapers and illustrated journals and magazines that had come by the previous day's mail, she thought she might as well sit down and write a long letter to her bosom friend in Chicago, through whose intermediation these verses might discreetly be brought to the

notice of Mr. Huysen. She had reasons for not asking any favour directly.

"DEAREST EM," she wrote—after having studied a long while as to how she should begin—"would it surprise you to know that I have at last found my *fate* in the very handsome person of a Scotch gamekeeper? Well, it ain't so; don't break the furniture; but the fact is my poor brain has been wool-gathering a little in this land of wild storms and legends and romantic ballads; and to-morrow I am fleeing away to Paris—the region of clear atmosphere, and reasonable people, and cynicism; and I hope to have any lingering cobwebs of romance completely blown out of my head. Not that I would call it romance, *even if it were to happen;* I should call it merely the plain result of my father's theories. You know he is always preaching that all men are born equal; which isn't true anyhow; he would get a little nearer the truth if he were to say that all men are born equal except hotel clerks, who are of a superior race; but wouldn't it be a joke if I were to take him at his word, and ask him how he would like a gamekeeper as his son-in-law? But you need not be afraid, my dear Em; this chipmunk has still got a little of her senses left; and I may say in the words of the poet—

'There is not in this wide world a valet so sweet'—

no, nor any Claude Melnotte of a gardener, nor any handsome coachman or groom, who could induce me to run away with him. It would be 'playing it too low down on pa,' as you used to say; besides, one knows how these things always end. Another besides; how do I know that he would marry me, even if I asked him?—and I *should* have to ask him, for he would never ask me. Now, Em, if you don't burn this letter the moment you have read it, I will murder you, as sure as you are alive.

"Besides, it is a shame. He is a real good fellow; and no such nonsense has got into his head, I know. I know it, because I tried him twice for fun; I got him to tie my cap under my chin; and I made him take my pocket-handkerchief out of my breast-pocket when I was fighting a salmon (I caught *five in one day*—monsters!), and do you

think the bashful young gentleman was embarrassed and showed trembling fingers? Not a bit; I think he thought me rather a nuisance—in the polite phraseology of the English people. But I wish I could tell you about him, really. It's all very well to say he is very handsome and hardy-looking and weather-tanned; but how can I describe to you how respectful his manner is, and yet always keeping his own self-respect, and he won't quarrel with me—he only laughs when I have been talking absolute folly—though papa and he have rare fights, for he has very positive opinions, and sticks to his guns, I can tell you. But the astonishing thing is his education; he has been nowhere, but seems to know everything; he seems to be quite content to be a gamekeeper, though his brother took his degree at college and is now in the Scotch Church. I tell you he makes me feel pretty small at times. The other night papa and I went along to his cottage after dinner, and found him reading Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*—lent him by his brother, it appeared. I borrowed the first volume—but, oh, squawks! it is a good deal too stiff work for the likes of me. And then there is never the least pretence or show, but all the other way; he will talk to you as long as you like about his deer-stalking and about what he has seen his dogs do; but never a word about books or writing—unless you happen to have found out.

"Now I'm coming to business. I have never seen any writing of his until this morning, when, after long goading, he showed me a little poem which I will copy out and enclose in this letter when I have finished. Now, darling Em, I want you to do me a real kindness; the first time you see Jack Huysen—I don't want to ask the favour of him direct—will you ask him to print it in the *Citizen*, and to say something nice about it? I don't want any patronage: understand—I mean let Jack Huysen understand—that Ronald Strang is a particular *friend* of both my father and myself; and that I am sending you this without his authority, but merely to give him a little pleasant surprise, perhaps, when he sees it in print; and perhaps to tempt him to give us some more. I should like him to print a volume,—for he is really far above his present station, and it is absurd he should not take his *place*,—and if he did that I

know of a young party who would buy 500 copies even if she were to go back home without a single Paris bonnet. Tell Jack Huysen there is to be *no patronage*, mind; there is to be nothing about the peasant-poet, or anything like that; for this man is a *gentleman*, if I know anything about it; and I won't have him trotted out as a phenomenon—to be discussed by the dudes who smoke cigarettes in Lincoln Park. If you could only talk to him for ten minutes it would be better than fifty letters, but I suppose there are *attractions nearer home* just at present. My kind remembrances to *T. T.*

"I forgot to say that I am quite ignorant as to whether newspapers ever pay for poetry—I mean if a number of pieces were sent. Or could Jack Huysen find a publisher who would undertake a volume; my father will see he does not lose anything by it? I really want to do something for this Ronald, for he has been so kind and attentive to us; and before long it may become more difficult to do so; for of course a man of his abilities is not likely to remain as he is; indeed, he has already formed plans for getting away altogether from his present way of life, and whatever he tries to do I know he will do—and easily. But if I talk any more about him, you will be making very *very* mistaken guesses; and I won't give you the delight of imagining even for a moment that I have been caught at last; when the sad event arrives there will be time enough for you to take your cake-walk of triumph up and down the room—of course to *Dancing in the Barn*, as in the days of old."

Here followed a long and rambling chronicle of her travels in Europe since her last letter, all of which may be omitted; the only point to be remarked was that her very brief experiences of Scotland took up a disproportionately large portion of the space, and that she was minute in her description of the incidents and excitement of salmon-fishing. Then followed an outline of her present plans; a string of questions; a request for an instant reply; and finally—

"*With dearest love, old Em,*

"*Thine,*

"*Carry.*"

And then she had to copy the verses; but when she had done that, and risen, and gone to the window for a time, some misgiving seemed to enter her mind, for she returned to the table, and sate down again, and wrote this postscript:

"Perhaps, after all, you won't see much in this little piece; if you were here, among the very places, and affected by all the old stories and romantic traditions and the wild scenery, it might be different. Since I've been to Europe I've come to see what's the trouble about our reading English history and literature at home; why, you can't do it, you can't understand it, unless you have lived in an atmosphere that is just full of poetry and romance, and meeting people whose names tell you they belong to the families who did great things in history centuries and centuries ago. I can't explain it very well—not even to myself; but I feel it; why, you can't take a single day's drive in England without coming across a hundred things of interest—Norman churches, and the tombs of Saxon Kings, and old abbeys, and monasteries, and battlefields, and, just as interesting as any, farm-houses of the sixteenth century in their quaint old-fashioned orchards. And as for Scotland, why, it is just steeped to the lips in poetry and tradition; the hills and the glens have all their romantic stories of the clans, many of them very pathetic; and you want to see these wild and lonely places before you can understand the legends. And in southern Scotland too—what could any one at home make of such a simple couplet as this—

'The King sits in Dunfermline town,
Drinking the blude-red wine;'

but when you come near Dunfermline and see the hill where Malcolm Canmore built his castle in the eleventh century, and when you are told that it was from this very town that Sir Patrick Spens and the Scots lords set out for 'Norroway o'er the faem,' everything comes nearer to you. In America, I remember very well, Flodden Field sounded to us something very far away, that we couldn't take much interest in; but if you were here just now, dear Em, and told that a bit farther north there was a river that the Earl of Caithness and his clan had to cross when they went to

Flodden, and that the people living there at this very day won't go near it on the anniversary of the battle, because on that day the ghosts of the earl and his men, all clad in green tartan, come home again and are seen to cross the river, wouldn't that interest you? In America we have got nothing behind us; when you leave the day before yesterday you don't want to go back. But here, in the most vulgar superstitions and customs, you come upon the strangest things. Would you believe it, less than twenty miles from this place there is a little lake that is supposed to cure the most desperate diseases—diseases that the doctors have given up; and the poor people meet at midnight, on the first Monday after the change of the moon, and then they throw a piece of money into the lake, and go in and dip themselves three times, and then they must get home before sunrise. Perhaps it is very absurd, but they belong to that same imaginative race of people who have left so many weird stories and poetical legends behind them; and what I say is that you want to come over and breathe this atmosphere of tradition and romance, and see the places, before you can quite understand the charm of all that kind of literature. And perhaps you don't find much in these verses about the poor people who have been driven away from their native strath? Well, they don't claim to be much. They were never meant for *you* to see. But yes, I do think you will like them; and anyhow Jack Huysen has got to like them, and treat them hospitably, unless he is anxious to have his hair raised.

"Gracious me, I think I must hire a hall. I have just read this scrawl over. Sounds rather muzzy, don't it? But it's this poor brain of mine that has got full of confusion and cobwebs and theories of equality, when I wasn't attending to it. My arms had the whole day's work to do—as they remind me at this minute; and the Cerebral Hemispheres laid their heads, or their half-heads together, when I was busy with the salmon; and entered into a conspiracy against me; and began to make pictures—ghosts, phantom earls, and romantic shepherds and peasant-poets, and I don't know what kind of dreams of a deer-stalker walking down Wabash Avenue. But, as I said, to-morrow I start for Paris, thank goodness; and in that

calmer atmosphere I hope to come to my senses again; and I will send you a long account of Lily Selden's marriage—though your last letter to me was a fraud: what do I care about the C. M. C. A.? *This* letter, anyhow, you must burn; I don't feel like reading it over again myself, or perhaps I would save you the trouble; but you may depend on it that the one I shall send you from Paris will be quite sane.

"Second P.S.—Of course you must manage Jack Huysen with a little discretion. I don't want to be drawn into it any more than I can help; I mean, I would just hate to write to him direct and ask him for a particular favour; but this is a very little one, and you know him as well as any of us. And mind you burn this letter—instantly—the moment you have read it—for it is just full of nonsense and wool-gathering; and *it will not occur again. Toujours à toi.* C. H."

"What have you been writing all this time?" her father said, when she rose.

"A letter—to Emma Kerfoot."

"It will make her stare. You don't often write long letters."

"I do not," said she, gravely regarding the envelope; and then she added solemnly: "But this is the record of a chapter in my life that is now closed for ever—at least, I hope so."

CHAPTER XIX.

HESITATIONS.

THE waggonette stood at the door; Miss Carry's luggage was put in; and her father was waiting to see her off. But the young lady herself seemed unwilling to take the final step; twice she went back into the inn, on some pretence or another; and each time she came out she looked impatiently around, as if wondering at the absence of some one.

"Well, ain't you ready yet?" her father asked.

"I want to say good-bye to Ronald," she said half angrily.

"Oh, nonsense—you are not going to America. Why, you will be back in ten days or a fortnight. See here,

Carry," he added, "are you sure you don't want me to go part of the way with you?"

"Not at all," she said promptly. "It is impossible for Mary to mistake the directions I wrote to her; and I shall find her in the Station Hotel at Inverness all right. Don't you worry about me, pappa."

She glanced along the road again, in the direction of the keeper's cottage; but there was no one in sight.

"Pappa dear," she said, in an undertone—for there were one or two onlookers standing by—"if Ronald should decide on giving up his place here, and trying what you suggested, you'll have to stand by him."

"Oh yes, I'll see him through," was the complacent answer. "I should take him to be the sort of man who can look after himself; but if he wants any kind of help—well, here I am; I won't go back on a man who is acting on my advice. Why, if he were to come out to Chicago——"

"Oh, no, not Chicago, pappa," she said, somewhat earnestly, "not to Chicago. I am sure he will be more at home—he will be happier—in his own country."

She looked around once more; and then she stepped into the waggonette.

"He might have come to see me off," she said, a little proudly. "Good-bye, pappa dear—I will send you a telegram as soon as I get to Paris."

The two horses sprang forward; Miss Carry waved her lily hand; and then set to work to make herself comfortable with wraps and rugs, for the morning was chill. She thought it was very unfriendly of Ronald not to have come to say good-bye. And what was the reason of it? Of course he could know nothing of the nonsense she had written to her friend in Chicago.

"Have you not seen Ronald about anywhere?" she asked of the driver.

"No, mem," answered that exceedingly shy youth, "he wass not about all the morning. But I heard the crack of a gun; maybe he wass on the hill."

And presently he said—

"I'm thinking that's him along the road—it's two of his dogs whatever."

And indeed this did turn out to be Ronald who was com-

ing striding along the road, with his gun over his shoulder, a brace of setters at his heels, and something dangling from his left hand. The driver pulled up his horses.

"I've brought ye two or three golden plover to take with ye, Miss Hodson," Ronald said—and he handed up the birds.

Well, she was exceedingly pleased to find that he had not neglected her, nay, that he had been especially thinking of her and her departure. But what should she do with these birds in a hotel?

"It's so kind of you," she said, "but really I'm afraid they're—would you not rather give them to my father?"

"Ye must not go away empty-handed," said he, with good-humoured insistence; and then it swiftly occurred to her that perhaps this was some custom of the neighbourhood; and so she accepted the little parting gift with a very pretty speech of thanks.

He raised his cap, and was going on.

"Ronald," she called, and he turned.

"I wish you would tell me," she said—and there was a little touch of colour in the pretty, pale, interesting face—"if there is anything I could bring from London that would help you—I mean books about chemistry—or—or—about trees—or instruments for land-surveying—I am sure I could get them——"

He laughed, in a doubtful kind of way.

"I'm obliged to ye," he said, "but it's too soon to speak about that. I havena made up my mind yet."

"Not yet?"

"No."

"But you will?"

He said nothing.

"Good-bye, then."

She held out her hand, so that he could not refuse to take it. So they parted; and the horses' hoofs rang again in the silence of the valley; and she sat looking after the disappearing figure and the meekly following dogs. And then, in the distance, she thought she could make out some faint sound: was he singing to himself as he strode along towards the little hamlet?

"At all events," she said to herself, with just a touch of pique, "he does not seem much downhearted at my going

away." And little indeed did she imagine that this song he was thus carelessly and unthinkingly singing was all about Meenie, and red and white roses, and trifles light and joyous as the summer air. For not yet had black care got a grip of his heart.

But this departure of Miss Carry for the south now gave him leisure to attend to his own affairs and proper duties, which had suffered somewhat from his attendance in the coble; and it was not until all these were put straight that he addressed himself to the serious consideration of the ambitious and daring project that had been placed before him. Hitherto it had been pretty much of an idle speculation—a dream, in short, that looked very charming and fascinating as the black-eyed young lady from over the seas sate in the stern of the boat and chatted through the idle hours. Her imagination did not stay to regard the immediate and practical difficulties and risks; all these seemed already surmounted; Ronald had assumed the position to which he was entitled by his abilities and personal character; she only wondered which part of Scotland he would be living in when next her father and herself visited Europe; and whether they might induce him to go over with them for a while to the States. But when Ronald himself, in cold blood, came to consider ways and means, there was no such plain and easy sailing. Not that he hesitated about cutting himself adrift from his present moorings; he had plenty of confidence in himself, and knew that he could always earn a living with his ten fingers, whatever happened. Then he had between £80 and £90 lodged in a savings bank in Inverness; and out of that he could pay for any classes he might have to attend, or perhaps offer a modest premium if he wished to get into a surveyor's office for a short time. But there were so many things to think of. What should he do about Maggie, for example? Then Lord Ailine had always been a good master to him: would it not seem ungrateful that he should throw up his situation without apparent reason? And so forth, and so forth, through cogitations long and anxious; and many a half-hour on the hillside and many a half-hour by the slumbering peat-fire was given to this great project; but always there was one side of the question that he shut

out from his mind. For how could he admit to himself that this lingering hesitation—this dread, almost, of what lay await for him in the future—had anything to do with the going away from Meenie, and the leaving behind him, and perhaps for ever, the hills and streams and lonely glens that were all steeped in the magic and witchery of her presence? Was it not time to be done with idle fancies? And if, in the great city—in Edinburgh or Glasgow, as the case might be—he should fall to thinking of Ben Loyal and Bonnie Strath-Naver, and the long, long days on Clebrig; and Meenie coming home in the evening from her wanderings by Mudal-Water, with a few wild-flowers, perhaps, or a bit of white heather, but always with her beautiful blue-gray Highland eyes so full of kindness as she stopped for a few minutes' friendly chatting—well, that would be a pretty picture to look back upon, all lambent and clear in the tender colours that memory loves to use. A silent picture, of course: there would be no sound of the summer rills, nor the sweeter sound of Meenie's voice; but not a sad picture; only remote and ethereal, as if the years had come between, and made everything distant and pale and dreamlike.

The first definite thing that he did was to write to his brother in Glasgow, acquainting him with his plans, and begging him to obtain some further particulars about the Highland and Agricultural Society's certificates. The answer that came back from Glasgow was most encouraging; for the Rev. Alexander Strang, though outwardly a heavy and lethargic man, had a shrewd head enough, and was an enterprising shifty person, not a little proud of the position that he had won for himself, and rather inclined to conceal from his circle of friends—who were mostly members of his congregation—the fact that his brother was merely a gamekeeper in the Highlands. Nay, more, he was willing to assist; he would take Maggie into his house, so that there might be no difficulty in that direction; and in the meantime he would see what were the best class-books on the subjects named, so that Ronald might be working away at them in these comparatively idle spring and summer months, and need not give up his situation prematurely. There was even some hint thrown out that

perhaps Ronald might board with his brother; but this was not pressed; for the fact was that Mrs. Alexander was a severely rigid disciplinarian, and on the few occasions on which Ronald had been their guest she had given both brothers to understand that the frivolous gaiety of Ronald's talk, and the independence of his manners, and his Gallio-like indifference about the fierce schisms and heart-burnings in the Scotch Church were not, in her opinion, in consonance with the atmosphere that ought to prevail in a Free Church minister's house. But on the whole the letter was very friendly and hopeful; and Ronald was enjoined to let his brother know when his decision should be finally taken, and in what way assistance could be rendered him.

One night the little Maggie stole away through the dark to the Doctor's cottage. There was a light in the window of Meenie's room; she could hear the sound of the piano; no doubt Meenie was practising and alone; and on such occasions a visit from Maggie was but little interruption. And so the smaller girl went boldly towards the house and gained admission, and was proceeding upstairs without any ceremony, when the sudden cessation of the music caused her to stop. And then she heard a very simple and pathetic air begin—just touched here and there with a few chords: and was Meenie, tired with the hard work of the practising, allowing herself this little bit of quiet relaxation? She was singing too—though so gently that Maggie could scarcely make out the words. But she knew the song—had not Meenie sung it many times before to her?—and who but Meenie could put such tenderness and pathos into the simple air? She had almost to imagine the words—so gentle was the voice that went with those lightly-touched chords—

> "*The sun rase sae rosy, the gray hills adorning,*
> *Light sprang the laverock, and mounted on hie,*
> *When true to the tryst o' blythe May's dewy morning,*
> *Jeanie cam' linking out owre the green lea.*
> *To mark her impatience I crap 'mong the brackens,*
> *Aft, aft to the kent gate she turned her black e'e;*
> *Then lying down dowilie, sighed, by the willow tree,*
> *'I am asleep, do not waken me.'*" *

* "*I am asleep, do not waken me*" is the English equivalent of the Gaelic name of the air, which is a very old one, and equally pathetic in its Irish and Highland versions.

Then there was silence. The little Maggie waited; for this song was a great favourite with Ronald, who himself sometimes attempted it; and she would be able to tell him when she got home that she had heard Meenie sing it—and he always listened with interest to anything, even the smallest particulars, she could tell him about Meenie and about what she had done or said. But where were the other verses? She waited and listened; the silence was unbroken. And so she tapped lightly at the door and entered.

And then something strange happened. For when Maggie shut the door behind her and went forward, Meenie did not at once turn her head to see who this was, but had hastily whipped out her handkerchief and passed it over her eyes. And when she did turn, it was with a kind of look of bravery—as if to dare any one to say that she had been crying—though there were traces of tears on her cheeks.

"Is it you, Maggie? I am glad to see you," she managed to say.

The younger girl was rather frightened and sorely concerned as well.

"But what is it, Meenie dear?" she said, going and taking her hand. "Are you in trouble?"

"No, no," her friend said, with an effort to appear quite cheerful, "I was thinking of many things—I scarcely know what. And now take off your things and sit down, Maggie, and tell me all about this great news. It was only this afternoon that my father learnt that you and your brother were going away; and he would not believe it at first, till he saw Ronald himself. And it is true, after all? Dear me, what a change there will be!"

She spoke quite in her usual manner now; and her lips were no longer trembling, but smiling; and the Highland eyes were clear, and as full of kindness as ever.

"But it is a long way off, Meenie," the smaller girl began to explain quickly, when she had taken her seat by the fire, "and Ronald is so anxious to please everybody, and—and that is why I came along to ask you what you think best."

"I?" said Meenie, with a sudden slight touch of reserve.

"It'll not be a nice thing going away among strange folk," said her companion, "but I'll no grumble if it's to do Ronald good; and even among strange folk—well, I don't care as long as I have Ronald and you, Meenie. And it's to Glasgow, and not to Edinburgh, he thinks he'll have to go; and then you will be in Glasgow too; so I do not mind anything else. It will not be so lonely for any of us; and we can spend the evenings together—oh no, it will not be lonely at all——"

"But, Maggie," the elder girl said gravely, "I am not going to Glasgow."

Her companion looked up quickly, with frightened eyes.

"But you said you were going, Meenie!"

"Oh no," the other said gently. "My mother has often talked of it—and I suppose I may have to go some time; but my father is against it; and I know I am not going at present anyway."

"And you are staying here—and—and Ronald and me—we will be by ourselves in Glasgow!" the other exclaimed, as if this prospect were too terrible to be quite comprehended as yet.

"But if it is needful he should go?" Meenie said. "People have often to part from their friends like that."

"Yes, and it's no much matter when they have plenty of friends," said the smaller girl, with her eyes becoming moist, "but, Meenie, I havena got one but you."

"Oh no, you must not say that," her friend remonstrated. "Why, there is your brother in Glasgow, and his family; I am sure they will be kind to you. And Ronald will make plenty of friends wherever he goes—you can see that for yourself; and do you think you will be lonely in a great town like Glasgow? It is the very place to make friends, and plenty of them——"

"Oh, I don't know what to do—I don't know what to do, if you are not going to Glasgow, Meenie!" she broke in. "I wonder if it was that that Ronald meant. He asked me whether I would like to stay here or go with him, for Mrs. Murray has offered to take me in, and I would have to help at keeping the books, and that is very kind of them, I am sure, for I did not think I could be of

any use to anybody. And you are to be here in Inver-Mudal—and Ronald away in Glasgow——"

Well, it was a bewildering thing. These were the two people she cared for most of all in the world; and virtually she was called upon to choose between them. And if she had a greater loyalty and reverence towards her brother, still, Meenie was her sole girl-friend, and monitress, and counsellor. What would her tasks be without Meenie's approval; how could she get on with her knitting and sewing without Meenie's aid; what would the days be like without the witchery of Meenie's companionship—even if that were limited to a passing word or a smile? Ronald had not sought to influence her choice; indeed, the alternative had scarcely been considered, for she believed that Meenie was going to Glasgow also; and with her hero brother and her beautiful girl-friend both there, what more could she wish for in the world? But now——?

Well, Meenie, in her wise and kind way, strove to calm the anxiety of the girl; and her advice was altogether in favour of Maggie's going to Glasgow with her brother Ronald, if that were equally convenient to him, and of no greater expense than her remaining in Inver-Mudal with Mrs. Murray.

"For you know he wants somebody to look after him," Meenie continued, with her eyes rather averted, "and if it does not matter so much here about his carelessness of being wet and cold, because he has plenty of health and exercise, it will be very different in Glasgow, where there should be some one to bid him be more careful."

"But he pays no heed to me," the little sister sighed, "unless I can tell him you have been saying so-and-so—then he listens. He is very strange. He has never once worn the blue jersey that I knitted for him. He asked me a lot of questions about how it was begun; and I told him as little as I could about the help you had given me," she continued evasively, "and when the snow came on, I thought he would wear it; but no—he put it away in the drawer with his best clothes, and it's lying there all neatly folded up—and what is the use of that? If you were going to Glasgow, Meenie, it would be quite different. It will be very lonely there.

"Lonely!" the other exclaimed; "with your brother Ronald, and your other brother's family, and all their friends. And then you will be able to go to school and have more regular teaching—Ronald spoke once or twice to me about that."

"Yes, indeed," the little Maggie said; but the prospect did not cheer her much; and for some minutes they both sate silent, she staring into the fire. And then she said bitterly—

"I wish the American people had never come here. It is all their doing. It never would have come into Ronald's head to leave Inver-Mudal but for them. And where else will he be so well known—and—and every one speaking well of him—and every one so friendly——"

"But, Maggie, these things are always happening," her companion remonstrated. "Look at the changes my father has had to make."

"And I wonder if we are never to come back to Inver-Mudal, Meenie?" the girl said suddenly, with appealing eyes.

Meenie tried to laugh, and said—

"Who can tell? It is the way of the world for people to come and go. And Glasgow is a big place—perhaps you would not care to come back after having made plenty of friends there."

"My friends will always be here, and nowhere else," the smaller girl said, with emphasis. "Oh, Meenie, do you think if Ronald were to get on well and make more money than he has now, he would come back here, and bring me too, for a week maybe, just to see every one again?"

"I cannot tell you that, Maggie," the elder girl said, rather absently.

After this their discussion of the strange and unknown future that lay before them languished somehow; for Meenie seemed preoccupied, and scarcely as blithe and hopeful as she had striven to appear. But when Maggie rose to return home—saying that it was time for her to be looking after Ronald's supper—her friend seemed to pull herself together somewhat, and at once and cheerfully accepted Maggie's invitation to come and have tea with her the following afternoon.

"For you have been so little in to see us lately," the small Maggie said; "and Ronald always engaged with the American people—and often in the evening too as well as the whole day long."

"But I must make a great deal of you now that you are going away," said Miss Douglas, smiling.

"And Ronald—will I ask him to stay in till you come?"

But here there was some hesitation.

"Oh no, I would not do that—no doubt he is busy just now with his preparations for going away. I would not say anything to him—you and I will have tea together by ourselves."

The smaller girl looked up timidly.

"Ronald is going away too, Meenie."

Perhaps there was a touch of reproach in the tone; at all events Meenie said, after a moment's embarrassment—

"Of course I should be very glad if he happened to be in the house—and—and had the time to spare; but I think he will understand that, Maggie, without your saying as much to him."

"He gave plenty of his time to the American young lady," said Maggie, rather proudly.

"But I thought you and she were great friends," Meenie said, in some surprise.

"It takes a longer time than that to make friends," the girl said; and by and by she left.

Then Meenie went up to her room again, and sate down in front of the dull, smouldering peat-fire, with its heavy lumps of shadow, and its keen edges of crimson, and its occasional flare of flame and shower of sparks. There were many pictures there—of distant things; of the coming spring-time, with all the new wonder and gladness somehow gone out of it; and of the long long shining summer days, and Inver-Mudal grown lonely; and of the busy autumn time, with the English people come from the south, and no Ronald there, to manage everything for them. For her heart was very affectionate; and she had but few friends; and Glasgow was a great distance away. There were some other fancies too, and self-questionings and perhaps even self-reproaches, that need not be mentioned here. When, by and by, she rose and went to the piano, which was still

open, it was not to resume her seat. She stood absently staring at the keys—for these strange pictures followed her; and indeed that one half-unconscious trial of "*I am asleep, do not waken me*" had been quite enough for her in her present mood.

CHAPTER XX.

"AMONG THE UNTRODDEN WAYS."

YES; it soon became clear that Meenie Douglas, in view of this forthcoming departure, had resolved to forego something of the too obvious reserve she had recently imposed on herself—if, indeed, that maidenly shrinking and shyness had not been rather a matter of instinct than of will. When Ronald came home on the following evening she was seated with Maggie in the old familiar way at a table plentifully littered with books, patterns, and knitting; and when she shook hands with him, her timidly uplifted eyes had much of the old friendliness in them, and her smile of welcome was pleasant to see. It was he who was diffident and very respectful. For if her mother had enjoined her to be a little more distant in manner towards this one or the other of those around her—well, that was quite intelligible; that was quite right; and he could not complain; but on the other hand, if the girl herself, in this very small domestic circle, seemed rather anxious to put aside those barriers which were necessary out of doors, he would not presume on her good-nature. And yet—and yet—he could not help thawing a little; for she was very kind, and even merry withal; and her eyes were like the eyes of the Meenie of old.

"I am sure Maggie will be glad to get away from Inver-Mudal," she was saying, "for she will not find anywhere a schoolmistress as hard as I have been. But maybe she will not have to go to school at all, if she has to keep house for you?"

"But she'll no have to keep house for me," Ronald said at once. "If she goes to Glasgow, she'll be much better with my brother's family, for that will be a home for her."

"And where will you go, Ronald?" she said.

"Oh, into a lodging—I can fend for myself."

At this she looked grave—nay, she did not care to conceal her disapproval. For had she not been instructing Maggie in the mysteries of housekeeping in a town—as far as these were known to herself: and had not the little girl showed great courage; and declared there was nothing she would not attempt rather than be separated from her brother Ronald?

"It would never do," said he, "to leave the lass alone in the house all day in a big town. It's very well here, where she has neighbours and people to look after her from time to time; but among strangers——"

Then he looked at the table.

"But where's the tea ye said ye would ask Miss Douglas in to?"

"We were so busy with the Glasgow housekeeping," Meenie said, laughing, "that we forgot all about it."

"I'll go and get it ready now," the little Maggie said, and she went from the room, leaving these two alone.

He was a little embarrassed; and she was also. There had been no *amantium irae* of any kind; but all the same the *integratio amoris* was just a trifle difficult; for she on her side was anxious to have their old relations re-established during the brief period that would elapse ere he left the neighbourhood, and yet she was hesitating and uncertain; while he on his side maintained a strictly respectful reserve. He "knew his place;" his respect towards her was part of his own self-respect; and if it did not occur to him that it was rather hard upon Meenie that all the advances towards a complete rehabilitation of their friendship should come from her, that was because he did not know that she was moved by any such wish, and also because he was completely ignorant of a good deal else that had happened of late. Of course, certain things were obvious enough. Clearly the half-frightened, distant, and yet regretful look with which she had recently met and parted from him when by chance they passed each other in the road was no longer in her eyes; there was a kind of appeal for friendliness in her manner towards him; she seemed to say, "Well, you are going away; don't let us forget the old terms on which we used

to meet." And not only did he quickly respond to that feeling, but also he was abundantly grateful to her; did not he wish to carry away with him the pleasantest memories of this beautiful, sweet-natured friend, who had made all the world magical to him for a while, who had shown him the grace and dignity and honour of true womanhood, and made him wonder no less at the charm of her clear-shining simplicity and naturalness? The very name of "Love Meenie" would be as the scent of a rose —as the song of a lark—for him through all the long coming years.

"It will make a great change about here," said she, with her eyes averted, "your going away."

"There's no one missed for long," he answered, in his downright fashion. "Where people go, people come; the places get filled up."

"Yes, but sometimes they are not quite the same," said she rather gently. She was thinking of the newcomer. Would he be the universal favourite that Ronald was—always good-natured and laughing, but managing everybody and everything; lending a hand at the sheep-shearing or playing the pipes at a wedding—anything to keep life moving along briskly; and always ready to give her father a day's hare-shooting or a turn at the pools of Mudal-Water when the spates began to clear? She knew quite well—for often had she heard it spoken of—that no one could get on as well as Ronald with the shepherds at the time of the heather-burning: when on the other moors the shepherds and keepers were growling and quarrelling like rival leashes of collies, on Lord Ailine's ground everything was peace and quietness and good humour. And then she had a vague impression that the next keeper would be merely a keeper; whereas Ronald was—Ronald.

"I'm sure I was half-ashamed," said he, "when I got his lordship's letter. It was as fair an offer as one man could make to another; or rather, half a dozen offers; for he said he would raise my wage, if that was what was wrong; or he would let me have another lad to help me in the kennels; or, if I was tired of the Highlands he would get me a place at his shooting in the south. Well, I was sweirt to trouble his lordship with my small affairs; but after that

I couldna but sit down and write to him the real reason of my leaving——"

"And I'm certain," said she quickly, "that he will write back and offer you any help in his power."

"No, no," said he, with a kind of laugh, "the one letter is enough—if it ever comes to be a question of a written character. But it's just real friendly and civil of him; and if I could win up here for a week or a fortnight in August, I would like well to lend them a hand and set them going; for it will be a good year for the grouse, I'm thinking——"

"Oh, will you be coming to see us in August?" she said, with her eyes suddenly and rather wistfully lighting up.

"Well, I don't know how I may be situated," said he. "And there's the railway expense—though I would not mind that much if I had the chance otherwise; for his lordship has been a good master to me; and I would just like to lend him a hand, and start the new man with the management of the dogs and the beats. That's one thing Lord Ailine will do for me, I hope: I hope he will let me have a word about the man that's coming in my place; I would not like to have a cantankerous ill-tempered brute of a fellow coming in to have charge of my dogs. They're the bonniest lot in Sutherlandshire."

All this was practical enough; and meanwhile she had set to work to clear the table, to make way for Maggie. When the young handmaiden appeared with the tea-things he left the room for a few minutes, and presently returned with a polecat-skin, carefully dressed and smoothed, in his hand.

"Here's a bit thing," said he, "I wish ye would take, if it's of any use to you. Or if ye could tell me anything ye wished it made into, I could have that done when I go south. And if your mother would like one or two of the deer-skins, I'm sure she's welcome to them; they're useful about a house."

"Indeed, you are very kind, Ronald," said she, flushing somewhat, "and too kind, indeed—for you know that ever since we have known you all these kindnesses have always been on one side—and—and—we have never had a chance of doing anything in return for you——"

"Oh, nonsense," said he good-naturedly. "Well, there is one thing your father could do for me—if he would take my gun, and my rifle, and rods and reels, and just keep them in good working order, that would be better than taking them to Glasgow and getting them spoiled with rust and want of use. I don't want to part with them altogether; for they're old friends; and I would like to have them left in safe keeping——"

She laughed lightly.

"And that is your way of asking a favour—to offer my father the loan of all these things. Well, I am sure he will be very glad to take charge of them——"

"And to use them," said he, "to use them; for that is the sure way of keeping them in order."

"But perhaps the new keeper may not be so friendly?"

"Oh, I will take care about that," said he confidently; "and in any case you know it was his lordship said your father might have a day on the Mudal-Water whenever he liked. And what do you think, now, about the little skin there?"

"I think I will keep it as it is—just as you have given it to me," she said simply.

In due course they had tea together; but that afternoon or evening meal is a substantial affair in the north—cold beef, ham, scones, oatmeal cake, marmalade, jam, and similar things all making their appearance—and one not to be lightly hurried over. And Meenie was so much at home now; and there was so much to talk over; and she was so hopeful. Of course, Ronald must have holiday-times, like other people; and where would he spend these, if he did not come back to his old friends? And he would have such chances as no mere stranger could have, coming through on the mail-cart and asking everywhere for a little trout-fishing. Ronald would have a day or two's stalking from Lord Ailine; and there was the loch; and Mudal-Water; and if the gentlemen were after the grouse, would they not be glad to have an extra gun on the hill for a day or two, just to make up a bag for them?

"And then," said Meenie, with a smile, "who knows but that Ronald may in time be able to have a shooting of his own? Stranger things have happened."

When tea was over and the things removed he lit his pipe, and the girls took to their knitting. And never, he thought, had Meenie looked so pretty and pleased and quickly responsive with her clear and happy eyes. He forgot all about Mrs. Douglas's forecast as to the future estate of her daughter; he forgot all about the Stuarts of Glengask and Orosay; this was the Meenie whom Mudal knew, whom Clebrig had charge of, who was the friend and companion of the birds and the wild-flowers and the summer streams. What a wonderful thing it was to see her small fingers so deftly at work; when she looked up the room seemed full of light and entrancement; her sweet low laugh found an echo in the very core of his heart. And they all of them, for this one happy evening, seemed to forget that soon there was to be an end. They were together; the world shut out; the old harmony re-established, or nearly re-established; and Meenie was listening to his reading of "the Eve of St. Agnes"—in the breathless hush of the little room—or she was praying, and in vain, for him to bring his pipes and play "Lord Lovat's Lament," or they were merely idly chatting and laughing, while the busy work of the fingers went on. And sometimes he sate quite silent, listening to the other two; and her voice seemed to fill the room with music; and he wondered whether he could carry away in his memory some accurate recollection of the peculiar, soft, rich tone, that made the simplest things sound valuable. It was a happy evening.

But when she rose to go away she grew graver; and as she and Ronald went along the road together—it was very dark, though there were a few stars visible here and there—she said to him in rather a low voice—

"Well, Ronald, the parting between friends is not very pleasant, but I am sure I hope it will all be for the best, now that you have made up your mind to it. And every one seems to think you will do well."

"Oh, as for that," said he, "that is all right. If the worst comes to the worst, there is always the Black Watch."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, they're always sending the Forty-Second into the

thick of it, no matter what part of the world the fighting is, so that a man has a good chance. I suppose I'm not too old to get enlisted; sometimes I wish I had thought of it when I was a lad—I don't know that I would like anything better than to be a sergeant in the Black Watch. And I'm sure I would serve three years for no pay at all if I could only get one single chance of winning the V.C. But it comes to few; it's like the big stag—it's there when ye least expect it; and a man's hand is not just always ready, and steady. But I'm sure ye needna bother about what's going to happen to me—that's of small account."

"It is of very great account to your friends, at all events," said she valiantly, "and you must not forget, when you are far enough away from here, that you have friends here who are thinking of you and always wishing you well. It will be easy for you to forget; you will have all kinds of things to do, and many people around you; but the others here may often think of you, and wish to hear from you. It is the one that goes away that has the best of it, I think—among the excitement of meeting strange scenes and strange faces——"

"But I am not likely to forget," said he, rather peremptorily; and they walked on in silence.

Presently she said—

"I have a little album that I wish you would write something in before you go away altogether."

"Oh yes, I will do that," said he, "and gladly."

"But I mean something of your own," she said rather more timidly.

"Why, but who told you——"

"Oh, every one knows, surely!" said she. "And why should you conceal it? There were the verses that you wrote about Mrs. Semple's little girl—I saw them when I was at Tongue last—and indeed I think they are quite beautiful: will you write out a copy of them in my album?"

"Or something else, perhaps," said he—for instantly it flashed upon him that it was something better than a mere copy that was needed for Meenie's book. Here, indeed, was a chance. If there was any inspiration to be gained from these wild hills and straths and lonely lakes, now was

the time for them to be propitious; would not Clebrig—the giant Clebrig—whose very child Meenie was—come to his aid, that so he might present to her some fragment of song or rhyme not unworthy to be added to her little treasury?

"I will send for the book to-morrow," said he.

"I hope it will not give you too much trouble," said she, as they reached the small gate, "but it is very pleasant to turn over the leaves and see the actual writing of your friends, and think of when you last saw them and where they are now. And that seems to be the way with most of our friends; I suppose it is because we have moved about so; but there is scarcely any one left—and if it was not for a letter occasionally, or a dip into that album, I should think we were almost alone in the world. Well, good-night, Ronald—or will you come in and have a chat with my father?"

"I am afraid it is rather late," he said.

"Well, good-night."

"Good-night, Miss Douglas," said he, and then he walked slowly back to his home.

And indeed he was in no mood to turn to the scientific volumes that had already arrived from Glasgow. His heart was all afire because of the renewal of Meenie's kindness; and the sound of her voice was still in his ears; and quite naturally he took out that blotting-pad full of songs and fragments of songs, to glance over them here and there, and see if amongst them there was any one likely to recall to him when he was far away from Inver-Mudal the subtle mystery and charm of her manner and look. And then he began to think what a stranger coming to Inver-Mudal would see in Meenie? Perhaps only the obvious things—the pretty oval of the cheek and chin, the beautiful proud mouth, the wide-apart contemplative eyes? And perhaps these would be sufficient to attract? He began to laugh with scorn at this stranger—who could only see these obvious things—who knew nothing about Meenie, and the sweetness of her ways, her shrewd common-sense and the frank courage and honour of her mind. And what if she were to turn coquette under the influence of this alien admiration? Or perhaps become sharply proud? Well, he set to work—out of

a kind of whimsicality—and in time had scribbled out this—

FLOWER AUCTION.

Who will buy pansies?
There are her eyes,
Dew-soft and tender.
Love in them lies.

Who will buy roses?
There are her lips,
And there is the nectar
That Cupidon sips.

Who will buy lilies?
There are her cheeks,
And there the shy blushing
That maidhood bespeaks

"Meenie, Love Meenie,
What must one pay?"
"Good stranger, the market's
Not open to-day!"

He looked at the verses again and again; and the longer he looked at them the less he liked them—he scarcely knew why. Perhaps they were a little too literary? They seemed to lack naturalness and simplicity; at all events, they were not true to Meenie; why should Meenie figure as a flippant coquette? And so he threw them away and turned to his books—not the scientific ones—to hunt out something that was like Meenie. He came near it in Tannahill, but was not quite satisfied. A verse or two in Keats held his fancy for a moment. But at last he found what he wanted in Wordsworth—

"A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye;
—Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky."

Yes; that was liker Meenie—who "dwelt among the untrodden ways."

CHAPTER XXI.

A LESSON IN FLY-FISHING.

MISS CARRY HODSON returned from Paris in a very radiant mood; she had had what she called a real good time, and everything connected with the wedding had gone off most successfully. Her dress, that she had ordered long before she came to the Highlands, was a perfect fit; Lily Selden made the most charming and beautiful of brides; and no less a person than a prince (rather swarthy, and hailing from some mysterious region east of the Carpathians) had proposed the health of the bridesmaids, and had made especial mention of the young ladies who had travelled long distances to be present on the auspicious occasion.

However, on the morning after her return to Inver-Mudal her equanimity was somewhat dashed. When she went along the passage to the little hall—to see what the morning was like outside—she found waiting there a respectable-looking elderly Highlander, with grizzled locks, who touched his cap to her, and who had her waterproof over his arm. This last circumstance made her suspicious; instantly she went back to her father.

"Who is that man?" she asked.

"What man?"

"Why, an old man, who is waiting there, and he has got my waterproof slung over his arm."

"Well, I suppose that is the new gillie."

"Isn't Ronald going down?" she said, with very evident disappointment.

"Of course not," her father said, with some sharpness. "I think you have taken up enough of his time. And just now, when he is getting ready to go away, do you think I could allow him to waste day after day in attending to us? Seems to me it would be more to the point if you put your small amount of brain into devising some means of squaring up with him for what he has done already."

"Oh, very well," she said—or rather, what she did really say was "Oh, vurry well"—and the pretty, pale, attractive face resumed its ordinary complacency, and she went off

to make friends with the new gillie. She was on good terms with the old Highlander in about a couple of minutes; and presently they were on their way down to the loch, along with the lad John. Her father was to follow as soon as he had finished his letters.

But she was now to discover, what she had never discovered before, that salmon-fishing on a loch is a rather monotonous affair, unless the fish are taking very freely indeed. For one thing, the weather had settled down into a fine, clear, spring-like calm and quiet that was not at all favourable to the sport. It was very beautiful, no doubt; for sometimes for hours together the lake would be like a sheet of glass—the yellow shores and purple birch-woods all accurately doubled, with nearer at hand the faint white reflections of the snow-peaks in the north stretching out into the soft and deep blue; and when a breath of wind, from some unexpected point of the compass, began to draw a sharp line of silver between earth and water, and then came slowly across the loch to them, ruffling out that magic inverted picture on its way, the breeze was deliciously fresh and balmy, and seemed to bring with it tidings of the secret life that was working forward to the leafiness of summer. They kept well out into the midst of this spacious circle of loveliness, for old Malcolm declared they would be doing more harm than good by going over the fishing ground; so she had a sufficiently ample view of this great panorama of water and wood and far mountain-slopes. But it grew monotonous. She began to think of Paris, and the brisk, busy days—a hurry of gaiety and pleasure and interest using up every possible minute. She wished she had a book—some knitting—anything. Why, when Ronald was in the boat—with his quick sarcastic appreciation of every story she had to tell, or every experience she had to describe—there was always enough amusement and talking. But this old man was hopeless. She asked him questions about his croft, his family, his sheep and cows; and he answered gravely; but she took no interest in his answers, as her father might have done. She was unmistakably glad to get ashore for lunch—which was picturesque enough, by the way, with that beautiful background all around; and

neither her father nor herself was in any hurry to break up the small picnic-party and set to work again.

Nor did they do much better in the afternoon—though her father managed to capture a small eight-pounder; and so, in the evening, before dinner, she went along to Ronald to complain. She found him busy with his books; his gun and cap and telescope lying on the table beside him, showed that he had just come in.

"Ay," said he, "it's slow work in weather like this. But will ye no sit down?" and he went and brought her a chair.

"No, I thank you," said she; "I came along to see if you thought there was likely to be any change. Is your glass a good one?"

"First-rate," he answered, and he went to the small aneroid and tapped it lightly. "It was given me by a gentleman that shot his first stag up here. I think he would have given me his head, he was so pleased. Well, no, Miss Hodson, there's not much sign of a change. But I'll tell ye what we'll do, if you're tired of the loch, we'll try one or two of the pools on the Mudal."

"You mean the river down there?"

"There's not much hope there either—for the water's low the now; but we might by chance get a little wind, or there are some broken bits in the stream——"

"But you mean with a fly—how could I throw a fly?" she exclaimed.

"Ye'll never learn younger," was the quiet answer. "If there's no change to-morrow I'll take ye up the river myself—and at least ye can get some practice in casting——"

"Oh no, no," said she hurriedly, "thank you very much, but I must not take up your time——"

"I'm no so busy that I cannot leave the house for an hour or two," said he—and she understood by his manner that he was "putting his foot down," in which case she knew she might just as well give in at once. "But I warn ye that it's a dour river at the best, and not likely to be in good ply; however, we might just happen on one." And then he added, by way of explanation, "If we should, it will have to be sent to Lord Ailine, ye understand."

"Why?"

"Because the river doesna belong to your fishing; it goes with the shooting."

"Oh," said she, somewhat coldly. "And so, when Lord Ailine gives any one a day's fishing he claims whatever fish they may catch?"

"When his lordship gives a day's fishing he does not; but when the keeper does—that's different," was the perfectly simple and respectful answer.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said she hastily, and sincerely hoping she had said nothing to wound his feelings. Apparently she had not, for he proceeded to warn her about the necessity of her putting on a thick pair of boots; and he also gently hinted that she might wear on her head something less conspicuous than the bright orange Tam o' Shanter of which she seemed rather fond.

Accordingly, next morning, instead of sending him a message that she was ready, she walked along to the cottage, accoutred for a thorough stiff day's work. The outer door was open, so she entered without ceremony; and then tapped at the door of the little parlour, which she proceeded to open also. She then found that Ronald was not alone; there was a young man sitting there, who instantly rose as she made her appearance. She had but a momentary glimpse of him, but she came to the conclusion that the gamekeepers in this part of the world were a good-looking race, for this was a strongly-built young fellow, keen and active, apparently, with a rather pink and white complexion, closely-cropped head, bright yellow moustache, and singularly clear blue eyes. He wore a plain tweed suit; and as he rose he picked up a billycock hat that was lying on the table.

"I'll see you to-night, Ronald," said he, "I'm going off by the mail again to-morrow."

And as he passed by Miss Carry, he said, very modestly and respectfully—

"I hope you will have good sport."

"Thank you," said she, most civilly, for he seemed a well-mannered young man, as he slightly bowed to her in passing, and made his way out.

Ronald had everything ready for the start.

"I'm feared they'll be laughing at us for trying the river

on so clear a day," said he, as he put his big fly-book in his pocket. "And there's been no rain to let the fish get up."

"Oh I don't mind about that," said she, as he held the door open, and she went out, "it will be more interesting than the lake. However, I've nothing to say against the lake fishing, for it has done such wonders for my father. I have not seen him so well for years. Whether it is the quiet life, or the mountain air, I don't know, but he sleeps perfectly, and he has entirely given up the bromide of potassium. I do hope he will take the shooting and come back in the autumn."

"His lordship was saying there were two other gentlemen after it," remarked Ronald significantly.

"Who was saying?"

"His lordship—that was in the house the now when ye came in."

"Was that Lord Ailine?" she said—and she almost paused in their walk along the road.

"Oh yes."

"You don't say! Why, how did he come here?"

"By the mail this morning."

"With the country people?"

"Just like anybody else," he said.

"Well, I declare! I thought he would have come with a coach and outriders—in state, you know——"

"What for?" said he impassively. "He had no luggage, I suppose, but a bag and a waterproof. It's different in the autumn, of course, when all the gentlemen come up, and there's luggage and the rifles and the cartridge-boxes —then they have to have a brake or a waggonette."

"And that was Lord Ailine," she said, half to herself; and there was no further speaking between them until they had gone past the Doctor's cottage and over the bridge and were some distance up "the strath that Mudal laves"—to quote her companion's own words.

"Now," said he, as he stooped and began to put together the slender grilse-rod, "we'll just let ye try a cast or two on this bit of open grass—and we'll no trouble with a fly as yet."

He fastened on the reel, got the line through the rings,

and drew out a few yards' length. Then he gave her the rod; showed her how to hold it; and then stood just behind her, with his right hand covering hers.

"Now," said he, "keep your left hand just about as steady as ye can—and don't jerk—this way——"

Of course it was really he who was making these few preliminary casts, and each time the line ran out and fell straight and trembling on the grass.

"Now try it yourself."

At first she made a very bad job of it—especially when she tried to do it by main force; the line came curling down not much more than the rod's length in front of her, and the more she whipped the closer became the curls.

"I'm afraid I don't catch on quite," she said, unconsciously adopting one of her father's phrases.

"Patience—patience," said he; and again he gripped her hand in his and the line seemed to run out clear with the gentlest possible forward movement.

And then he put out more line—and still more and more—until every backward and upward swoop of the rod, and every forward cast, was accompanied by a "swish" through the air. This was all very well; and she was throwing a beautiful, clean line; but she began to wonder when the bones in her right hand would suddenly succumb and be crunched into a jelly. The weight of the rod—which seemed a mighty engine to her—did not tell on her, for his one hand did the whole thing; but his grip was terrible; and yet she did not like to speak.

"Now try for yourself," said he, and he stepped aside.

"Wait a minute," she said—and she shook her hand, to get the life back into it.

"I did not hurt you?" said he, in great concern.

"We learn in suffering what we teach in song," she said lightly. "If I am to catch a salmon with a fly-rod, I suppose I have got to go through something."

She set to work again; and, curiously enough, she seemed to succeed better with the longer line than with the short one. There was less jerking; the forward movement was more even; and though she was far indeed from throwing a good line, it was very passable for a beginner.

"You know," said she, giving him a good-humoured hint, "I don't feel like doing this all day."

"Well, then, we'll go down to the water now," said he, and he took the rod from her.

They walked down through the swampy grass and heather to the banks of the stream; and here he got out his fly-book—a bulged and baggy volume much the worse for wear. And then it instantly occurred to her that this was something she could get for him—the most splendid fly-book and assortment of salmon flies to be procured in London—until it just as suddenly occurred to her that he would have little use for these in Glasgow. She saw him select a smallish black and gold and crimson-tipped object from that bulky volume; and a few minutes thereafter she was armed for the fray, and he was standing by watching.

Now the Mudal, though an exceedingly "dour" salmon-river, is at least easy for a beginner to fish, for there is scarcely anywhere a bush along its level banks. And there were the pools—some of them deep and drumly enough in all conscience; and no doubt there were salmon in them, if only they could be seduced from their lair. For one thing, Ronald had taken her to a part of the stream where she could not, in any case, do much harm by her preliminary whippings of the water.

She began—not without some little excitement, and awful visions of triumph and glory if she should really be able to catch a salmon by her own unaided skill. Of course she caught in the heather behind her sometimes; and occasionally the line would come down in a ghastly heap on the water; but then again it would go fairly out and over to the other bank, and the letting it down with the current and drawing it across—as he had shown her in one or two casts—was a comparatively easy matter. She worked hard, at all events, and obeyed implicitly—until alas! there came a catastrophe.

"A little bit nearer the bank if you can," said he; "just a foot nearer."

She clenched her teeth. Back went the rod with all her might—and forward again with all her might—but midway and overhead there was a mighty crack like that of a horse-

whip; and calmly he regarded the line as it fell on the water.

"The fly's gone," said he—but with not a trace of vexation.

"Oh, Ronald, I'm so sorry!" she cried, for she knew that these things were expensive, even where they did not involve a considerable outlay of personal skill and trouble.

"Not at all," said he, as he quietly sate down on a dry bunch of heather and got out his book again. "All beginners do that. I'll just show ye in a minute or two how to avoid it. And we'll try a change now."

Indeed she was in no way loth to sit down on the heather too; and even after he had selected the particular Childers he wanted, she took the book, and would have him tell her the names of all the various flies, which, quite apart from their killing merits, seemed to her beautiful and interesting objects. And finally she said—

"Ronald, my arms are a little tired. Won't you try a cast or two? I am sure I should learn as much by looking on."

He did as he was bid; and she went with him; but he could not stir anything. The river was low; the day was clear; there was no wind. But at last they came to a part of the stream where there was a dark and deep pool, and below that a wide bed of shingle, while between the shingle and the bank was a narrow channel where the water tossed and raced before breaking out into the shallows. He drew her a little bit back from the bank and made her take the rod again.

"If there's a chance at all, it's there," he said. "Do ye see that stone over there?—well, just try to drop the fly a foot above the stone, and let it get into the swirl."

She made her first cast—the line fell in a tangled heap about three yards short.

"Ye've got out of the way of it," said he, and he took the rod from her, let out a little more line, and then gave it to her again, standing behind her, with his hand over-gripping hers.

"Now!"

The fly fell a foot short—but clean. The next cast it fell at the precise spot indicated, and was swept into the

current, and dragged slowly and jerkily across. Again he made the cast for her, with the same negative result; and then he withdrew his hand.

"That's right—very well done!" he said, as she continued.

"Yes, but what's the use when you have tried——"

She had scarcely got the words out when she suddenly found the line held tight—and tighter—she saw it cut its way through the water, up and towards the bank of the pool above—and down and down was the point of the rod pulled until it almost touched the stream. All this had happened in one wild second.

"Let the line go!—what are ye doing, lassie?" he cried.

The fact was that in her sudden alarm she had grasped both line and rod more firmly than ever; and in another half second the fish must inevitably have broken something. But this exclamation of his recalled her to her senses—she let the line go free—got up the rod—and then waited events—with her heart in her mouth. She had not long to wait. It very soon appeared to her as if she had hooked an incarnate flash of lightning; for there was nothing this beast did not attempt to do; now rushing down the narrow channel so close to the bank that a single out-jutting twig must have cut the line; now lashing on the edge of the shallows; twice jerking himself into the air; and then settling down in the deep pool, not to sulk, but to twist and tug at the line in a series of angry snaps. And always it was "Oh, Ronald, what shall I do now?" or "Ronald, what will he do next?"

"You're doing well enough," said he placidly. "But it will be a long fight; and ye must not let him too far down the stream, or he'll take ye below the footbridge. And don't give him much line; follow him, rather."

She was immediately called on to act on this advice; for with one determined, vicious rush, away went the salmon down the stream—she after him as well as her woman's skirts would allow, and always and valorously she was keeping a tight strain on the pliant rod. Alas! all of a sudden her foot caught in a tuft of heather—down she went, prone, her arms thrown forward so that nothing could save

her. But did she let go the rod? Not a bit! She clung to it with the one hand; and when Ronald helped her to her feet again, she had no thought of herself at all—all her breathless interest was centred on the salmon. Fortunately that creature had now taken to sulking, in a pool farther down; and she followed him, getting in the line the while.

"But I'm afraid you're hurt," said he.

"No, no."

Something was tickling the side of her face. She shifted the grip of the rod, and passed the back of her right hand across her ear; a brief glance showed her that her knuckles were stained with blood. But she took no further heed; for she had to get both hands on the rod again.

"She has pluck, that one," Ronald said to himself; but he said nothing aloud, he wanted her to remain as self-possessed as possible.

"And what if he goes down to the footbridge, Ronald?" she said presently.

"But ye must not let him."

"But if he will go?"

"Then ye'll give me the rod and I'll take it under the bridge."

The fish lay there as heavy and dead as a stone; nothing they could do could stir him an inch.

"The beast has been at this work before," Ronald said. "That jagging to get the hook out is the trick of an old hand. But this sulking will never do at all."

He left her and went farther up the stream to the place where the river ran over the wide bed of shingle. There he deliberately walked into the water—picking up a few pebbles as he went—and, with a running leap, crossed the channel and gained the opposite bank. Then he quickly walked down to within a yard or two of the spot where the "dour" salmon lay.

She thought this was very foolish child's play that he should go and fling little stones at a fish he could not see. But presently she perceived that he was trying all he could to get the pebbles to drop vertically and parallel with the line. And then the object of this device was apparent. The salmon moved heavily forward, some few inches only. Another pebble was dropped. This time the fish made a

violent rush up stream that caused Miss Carry's reel to shriek; and off she set after him (but with more circumspection this time as regards her footing), getting in the line as rapidly as possible as she went. Ronald now came over and joined her, and this was comforting to her nerves.

Well, long before she had killed that fish she had discovered the difference between loch-fishing and river-fishing; but she did kill him in the end; and mightily pleased she was when she saw him lying on the sere wintry grass. Ronald would have had her try again; but she had had enough; it was past lunch time, and she was hungry; moreover, she was tired; and then again she did not wish that he should waste the whole day. So, when she had sate down for a while, and watched him tie the salmon head and tail, they set out for the village again, very well content; while as for the slight wound she had received by her ear catching on a twig of heather when she fell, that was quite forgotten now.

"And ye are to have the fish," said he. "I told his lordship this morning you were going to try your hand at the casting; and he said if you got one you would be proud of it, no doubt, and ye were to keep it, of course."

"Well, that is very kind; I suppose I must thank him if I see him?"

And she was very curious to know all about Lord Ailine; and why he should come to Inver-Mudal merely for these few hours; and what kind of people he brought with him in the autumn. He answered her as well as he could; and then they went on to other things—all in a very gay and merry mood, for he was as proud as she was over this achievement.

At the same moment Meenie Douglas was in her own little room, engaged on a work of art of a not very ambitious kind. She had lying before her on the table a pencil-sketch in outline of such features of the landscape as could be seen from the window—the loch, the wooded promontories, Ben Clebrig, and the little clump of trees that sheltered the inn; and she was engaged in making a smaller copy of this drawing, in pen and ink, on a paper-cutter of brown wood. She was not much of an artist,

perhaps ; but surely these simple outlines were recognisable ; and if they were to be entitled "*A Souvenir*," and carried away to the south as a little parting present, might they not in some idle moment of the future recall some brief memory of these northern wilds ? So she was at work on this task —and very careful that the lines should be clear and precise —when she heard the sound of voices without—or rather one voice, which presently she recognised to be Ronald's : she could not easily mistake it. And if she were to go to the window and get him to stop for a minute at the gate, and show him the sketch that she had just about finished—perhaps he would be pleased ?

She went to the window—but instantly drew back. She had just caught a glimpse : it was the American young lady he was walking with—at a time when he was supposed to be so busy ; and he was carrying her rod for her and her ulster as well as the salmon ; and they were laughing and gaily talking together, like a pair of lovers almost on this clear spring day. Meenie went slowly back to the table—her face perhaps a trifle paler than usual ; and she sate down and began to look at the little drawing that she had been rather proud of. But her lips were proud and firm. Why should she give a drawing to any one—more especially to one who was so ready with his friendship and so quick to consort with strangers ? The lines on the brown wood seemed cold and uninteresting ; she was no longer anxious that they should suggest an accurate picture ; nay, she pushed the thing away from her, and rose, and went back to the window, and stood idly gazing out there, her lips still proud, her mien defiant.

And then—well, Ronald was going away. Was it worth while to let pride or self-love come between them and becloud these last few days, when perhaps they might never see each other again ? For well she knew of her mother's aims and hopes with regard to herself ; and well she knew that—whatever she may have guessed from the verses of Ronald's which assuredly had never been meant for her to see—it was neither for him nor for her to expect that the harsh facts and necessities of the world should give place and yield to a passing fancy, a dream, a kind of wistful, half-poetic shadow of what otherwise might have been. But

at least Ronald and she might part friends; nay, they should part friends. And so she returned to the table—overmastering her momentary pride; and she took up the discarded little drawing and regarded it with gentler eyes. For, after all (as she could not forget) Ronald was going away.

CHAPTER XXII.

POETA . . . NON FIT.

It soon became obvious that the salmon-fishers from the other side of the Atlantic had got into a long spell of deplorably fine weather; and a gentle melancholy settled down upon the souls of the gillies. In vain, morning after morning, the men searched every quarter of the heavens for any sign of even a couple of days' deluge to flood the rivers and send the kelts down and bring the clean salmon up from the sea. This wild and bleak region grew to be like some soft summer fairyland; the blue loch and the yellow headlands, and the far treeless stretches of moor lay basking in the sunlight; Ben Loyal's purples and browns were clear to the summit; Ben Clebrig's snows had nearly all melted away. Nor could the discontented boatmen understand how the two strangers should accept this state of affairs with apparent equanimity. Both were now provided with a book; and when the rods had been properly set so as to be ready for any emergency, they could pass the time pleasantly enough in this perfect stillness, gliding over the smooth waters, and drinking in the sweet mountain air. As for Miss Carry, she had again attacked the first volume of Gibbon—for she would not be beaten; and very startling indeed it was when a fish did happen to strike the minnow, to be so suddenly summoned back from Palmyra to this Highland loch. In perfect silence, with eyes and attention all absented, she would be reading thus—

"*When the Syrian queen was brought into the presence of Aurelian, he sternly asked her, how she had presumed to rise in arms against the Emperor of Rome? The answer of Zenobia was a prudent mixture of respect and firmness*"—

when sharp would come the warning cry of Malcolm—"There he is, Miss!—there he is!"—and she would dash down the historian to find the rod being violently shaken and the reel screaming out its joyous note. Moreover, in this still weather, the unusual visitor not unfrequently brought some other element of surprise with him. She acquired a considerable experience of the different forms of foul-hooking and of the odd manœuvres of the fish in such circumstances. On one occasion the salmon caught himself on the minnow by his dorsal fin; and for over an hour contented himself with rolling about under water without once showing himself, and with such a strain that she thought he must be the champion fish of the lake: when at last they did get him into the boat he was found to be a trifle under ten pounds. But, taken altogether, this cultivation of literature, varied by an occasional "fluke" of a capture, and these placid and dreamlike mornings and afternoons, were far from being as satisfactory as the former and wilder days when Ronald was in the boat, even with all their discomforts of wind and rain and snow.

By this time she had acquired another grievance.

"Why did you let him go, pappa, without a single word?" she would say, as they sate over their books or newspapers in the evening. "It was my only chance. You could easily have introduced yourself to him by speaking of the shooting——"

"You know very well, Carry," he would answer—trying to draw her into the fields of common sense—"I can say nothing about that till I see how mother's health is."

"I am sure she would say yes if she saw what the place has done for you, pappa; salmon-fishing has proved better for you than bromide of potassium. But that's not the trouble at all. Why did you let him go? Why did you let him spend the evening at the Doctor's?—and the next morning he went about the whole time with Ronald! My only chance of spurning a lord, too. Do they kneel in this country, pappa, when they make their declaration; or is that only in plays? Never mind; it would be all the same. 'No, my lord; the daughter of a free Republic cannot wed a relic of feudalism; farewell, my lord, fare well! I know that you are heart-broken for life; but the

daughter of a free Republic must be true to her manifest destiny.'"

"Oh, be quiet!"

"And then the girls at home, when I got back, they would all have come crowding around: 'Do tell, now, did you get a British nobleman to propose, Carry?' 'What do you imagine I went to Europe for?' 'And you rejected him?' 'You bet your pile on that. Why, you should have seen him writhe on the floor when I spurned him! I spurned him, I tell you I did—the daughter of a free Republic'——"

"Will you be quiet!"

"But it was really too bad, pappa!" she protested. "There he was lounging around all the morning. And all I heard him say was when he was just going—when he was on the mail-car, 'Ronald,' he called out, 'have you got a match about you?'—and he had a wooden pipe in his hand. And that's all I know about the manners and conversation of the British nobility; and what will they say of me at home?"

"When does Ronald go?" he would ask; and this, at least, was one sure way of bringing her back to the paths of sanity and soberness; for the nearer that this departure came, the more concerned she was about it, having some faint consciousness that she herself had a share of the responsibility.

And in another direction, moreover, she was becoming a little anxious. No message of any kind had arrived from the *Chicago Citizen*. Now she had written to Miss Kerfoot before she left for Paris; her stay in the French capital had extended to nearly three weeks; there was the space occupied in going and returning; so that if Jack Huysen meant to do anything with the verses it was about time that that should appear. And the more she thought of it the more she set her heart on it, and hoped that Ronald's introduction to the reading public would be a flattering one and one of which he could reasonably be proud. Her father had it in his power to secure his material advancement; and that was well enough; but what if it were reserved for her to confer a far greater service on him? For if this first modest effort were welcomed in a friendly

way, might he not be induced to put forth a volume, and claim a wider recognition? It need not interfere with his more practical work; and then, supposing it were successful? Look at the status it would win for him—a thing of far more value in the old country, where society is gradated into ranks, than in her country, where every one (except hotel clerks, as she insisted) was on the same plane. He would then be the equal of anybody—even in this old England; she had at least acquired so far a knowledge of English society. And if he owed the first suggestion and impulse to her?—if she were to be the means, in however small and tentative a fashion, of his ultimately establishing his fame? That he could do so if he tried, she never thought of doubting. She saw him every day, and the longer she knew him the more she was certain that the obvious mental force that seemed to radiate from him in the ordinary conversation and discussion of everyday life only wanted to be put into a definite literary channel to make its mark. And was not the time ripe for a poet? And it was not Edinburgh, or Glasgow, or London that had nowadays to decide on his merits, but two great continents of English-speaking people.

At length came the answer to her urgent prayer—a letter from Miss Kerfoot and a copy of the *Chicago Citizen*. The newspaper she opened first; saw with delight that a long notice—a very long notice indeed—had been accorded to the verses she had sent; and with a proud heart she put the paper in her pocket, for careful reading when she should get down to the lake. Miss Kerfoot's letter she glanced over; but it did not say much; the writer observed that Mr. Jack Huysen had only seemed half pleased when informed of Carry's extraordinary interest in the phenomenal Scotch gamekeeper; and, referring to the article in the *Citizen*, she said Jack Huysen had entrusted the writing of it to Mr. G. Quincy Regan, who was, she understood, one of the most cultured young men in Chicago, and likely to make quite a reputation for himself ere long. There were some other matters mentioned in this letter; but they need not detain us here.

Miss Carry was in very high spirits as she set forth from the inn with her father to walk down to the boats. They

met Ronald, too, on their way; he was accompanied by the man who was to take his place after his leaving; and Miss Carry could not help comparing the two of them as they came along the road. But, after all, it was not outward appearance that made the real difference between men; it was mental stature; she had that in her pocket which could show to everybody how Ronald was a head and shoulders over any of his peers. And she took but little interest in the setting up of the rods or the selection of the minnows; she wanted to be out on the lake, alone, in the silence, to read line by line and word by word this introduction of her hero to the public.

The following is the article:

"A REMARKABLE LITERARY DISCOVERY—OUR FELLOW-CITIZENS ABROAD—ANOTHER RUSTIC POET—CHICAGO CLAIMS HIM. It may be in the recollection of some of our readers that a few years ago a small party of American tourists, consisting of Curtis H. Mack, who was one of our most distinguished major-generals in the rebellion, and is now serving on the Indian frontier; his niece, Miss Hettie F. Doig, a very talented lady and contributor to several of our best periodicals; and John Grimsby Patterson, editor of the Baltimore *Evening News*, were travelling in Europe, when they had the good fortune to discover an Irish poet, Patrick Milligan, who had long languished in obscurity, no doubt the victim of British jealousy as well as of misrule. Major-General Mack interested himself in this poor man, amd, in conjunction with William B. Stevens, of Cleveland, Ohio, had him brought over to this country, where they were eventually successful in obtaining for him a post-mastership in New Petersburg, Conn., leaving him to devote such time as he pleased to the service of the tuneful nine. Mr. Milligan's Doric reed has not piped to us much of late years; but we must all remember the stirring verses which he wrote on the occasion of Colonel George W. Will's nomination for Governor of Connecticut. It has now been reserved for another party of American travellers, still better known to us than the above, for they are no other than our esteemed fellow-citizen, Mr. Josiah Hodson and his brilliant and accomplished daughter, Miss Caroline Hodson, to make a similar discovery in the Highlands of

Scotland; and in view of such recurring instances, we may well ask whether there be not in the mental alertness of our newer civilisation a capacity for the detection and recognition of intellectual merit which exists not among the deadening influences of an older and exhausted civilisation. It has sometimes been charged against this country that we do not excel in arts and letters; that we are in a measure careless of them; that political problems and material interests occupy our mind. The present writer, at least, is in no hurry to repel that charge, odious as it may seem to some. We, as Americans, should remember that the Athenian Republic, with which our western Republic has nothing to fear in the way of comparison, when it boasted its most lavish display of artistic and literary culture, was no less conspicuous for its moral degeneracy and political corruption. It was in the age of Pericles and of Phidias, of Socrates and Sophocles, of Euripides and Aristophanes and Thucydides, that Athens showed herself most profligate; private licence was unbridled; justice was bought and sold; generals incited to war that they might fill their pockets out of the public purse; and all this spectacle in striking contrast with the manly virtues of the rude and unlettered kingdom of Sparta, whose envoys were laughed at because they had not the trick of Athenian oratory and casuistry. We say, then, that we are not anxious to repel this charge brought against our great western Republic, that we assign to arts and letters a secondary place; on the contrary, we are content that the over-cultivation of these should fatten on the decaying and effete nations of Europe, as phosphorus shines in rotten wood."

Now she had determined to read every sentence of this article conscientiously, as something more than a mere intellectual treat; but, as she went on, joy did not seem to be the result. The reference to Patrick Milligan and the postmastership in Connecticut she considered to be distinctly impertinent; but perhaps Jack Huysen had not explained clearly to the young gentleman all that she had written to Emma Kerfoot? Anyhow, she thought, when he came to Ronald's little Highland poem, he would perhaps drop his Athenians, and talk more like a reasonable human being.

"That the first strain from the new singer's lyre should

be placed at the services of the readers of the *Citizen*, we owe to the patriotism of the well-known and charming lady whose name we have given above ; nor could the verses have fallen into better hands. In this case there is no need that Horace should cry to Tyndaris—

O matre pulchrâ filia pulchrior,
Quem criminosis cunque voles modum
Pones iambis, sive flammâ
Sive mari libet Hadriano.

Moreover, we have received a hint that this may not be the last piece of the kind with which we may be favoured ; so that we have again to thank our fair fellow-townswoman for her kindly attention. But lest our readers may be growing weary of this *prolegomenon*, we will at once quote this latest utterance of the Scottish muse which has come to us under such favourable auspices : "

Here followed Ronald's poor verses, that perhaps looked insignificant enough, after this sonorous trumpet-blaring. The writer proceeded :

" Now certain qualities in this composition are so obvious that we need hardly specify them ; we give the writer credit for simplicity, pathos, and a hearty sympathy with the victims of the tyrannical greed of the chase-loving British landlord. But it is with no intent of looking a gift-horse in the mouth (which would be a poor return for the courtesy of the lady who has interested herself in the rustic bard) if we proceed to resolve this piece into its elements, that we may the more accurately cast the horoscope of this new applicant for the public applause. To begin with, the sentiment of nostalgia is but a slender backbone for any work of literary art. In almost every case it is itself a fallacy. What were the conditions under which these people—arbitrarily and tyrannically, it may have been—were forced away from their homes ? Either they were bad agriculturists or the land was too poor to support them ; and in either case their transference to a more generous soil could be nothing but a benefit to them. Their life must have been full of privations and cares. *Forsan et hæc olim meminisse juvabit ;* but the pleasure ought to lie in thinking of the escape ; so that we maintain that to base any piece of literary work on such a false sentiment as

nostalgia is seen to be, leads us to suspect the *veracity* of the writer and calls upon us to be on our guard. Moreover, we maintain that it is of the essence of pastoral and idyllic poetry to be cheerful and jocund; and it is to be observed that sadness prevails in poetry only when a nation has passed its youth and becomes saturated with the regret of old age. We prefer the stories told

Where Corydon and Thyrsis met
Are at their savoury dinner set;

and the lyrist when he sings

Dulce ridentem Lalagen amabo,
Dulce loquentem;

and we hold that when the poets of a nation are permeated by a lackadaisical sentiment—when they have the candour to style themselves the idle singers of an empty day—when the burden of their song is regret and weariness and a lamentation over former joys—then it is time for such poets and the nation they represent to take a back seat in the lecture halls of literature, and give way to the newer and stronger race that is bound to dominate the future."

She read no farther; and it is a great pity that she did not; for the writer by and by went on to say some very nice things about these unlucky verses; and even hinted that here was a man who might be benefited by coming to stay in Chicago,—"the future capital of the future empire of the world,"—and by having his eyes opened as to the rate of progress possible in these modern days; and wound up with a most elaborate compliment to the intellectual perspicacity and judgment of Miss Carry herself. She did not read beyond what is quoted above for the simple reason that she was in a most violent rage, and also extremely mortified with herself for being so vexed. She tore the newspaper into shreds, and crushed these together, and flung them into the bottom of the boat. Her cheeks were quite pale; her eyes burning; and through all the anger of her disappointment ran the shame of the consciousness that it was she who had exposed Ronald to this insult. What though he should never know anything about it? Her friends in Chicago would know. And it was the man whom

she wanted to glorify and make a hero of who had, through her instrumentality, been subjected to the pedantic criticism, the pretentious analyses, and, worst of all, the insulting patronage of this unspeakable ass. Suddenly she regretted the destruction of the newspaper; she would like to have looked at it again, to justify her wrath. No matter; she could remember enough; and she would not forget Jack Huysen's share in this transaction.

She was very silent and reserved at lunch time; and her father began to believe that, after all, in spite of her repeated assurances, their ill-luck with the fishing was weighing on her spirits.

"You know, Carry," said he, "it is not in the nature of things that weather like this can last in the Highlands of Scotland. It is notoriously one of the wettest places in the world. There *must* be rain coming soon; and then think of all the fish that will be rushing up in shoals, and what a time we shall have."

"I am not disappointed with the fishing at all, pappa," she said. "I think we have done very well."

"What is the matter, then?"

"Oh, nothing."

And then she said—

"Well, I will tell you, pappa. I asked Jack Huysen to do me a very particular favour; and he did not do it; and when I next see Jack Huysen, I think he will find it a very cold day."

The words were mysterious; but the tone was enough.

And all the afternoon she sate in the stern of the coble and brooded, composing imaginary letters to the editor of the *New York Herald*, to the editor of the *Nation*, to the editor of the Chicago *Tribune*, to the editor of *Puck*, and a great many other journals, all of these phantom epistles beginning "As an American girl I appeal to you," and proceeding to beg of the editor to hold up to merciless scorn a certain feeble, shallow, and impertinent article (herewith enclosed) which had appeared in the *Chicago Citizen*. And on the way home, too, in the evening, she began to question her father as to his personal acquaintance with editors and journalists, which seemed to be of the slightest; and she at length admitted that she wanted some

one to reply—and sharply—to an article that had been written about a friend of hers.

"You let that alone," her father said. "It's not very easy for any one to meddle in the politics of our country without coming out more or less tattooed; for they don't mind what they say about you; and you are very well to be out of it."

"It isn't politics at all," she said. "And—and—the article is written about a friend of mine—and—I want to have the writer told what a fool he is."

"But probably he would not believe it," her father said quietly.

"He would see that some one else believed it."

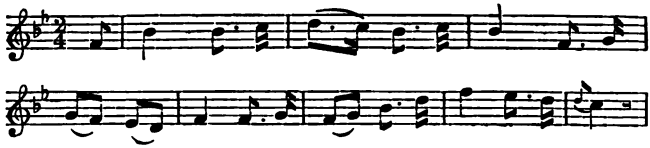
"I am not sure that that would hurt him much," was the unsatisfactory answer.

When they drew near to Inver-Mudal she found herself quite afraid and ashamed at the thought of their possibly meeting Ronald. Had she not betrayed him? He had sought for no recognition; probably he was too proud or too manly and careless about what any one might write of him; it was she who had put him into that suppliant attitude, and brought upon him the insolent encouragement of a microcephalous fool. This was the return she had made him for all his kindness to her father and to herself. Why, he had told her to burn the verses! And to think that she should have been the means of submitting them to the scrutiny and patronage of this jackanapes—and that Mr. J. C. Huysen should as good as say "Well, this is what we think of your prodigy"—all this was near bringing tears of rage to her eyes. For Miss Carry, it must be repeated, was "a real good fellow," and very loyal to her friends, and impatient of injustice done them; and perhaps, unconsciously to herself, she may have felt some of the consternation of the wild animal whose duty it is to protect her mate with her superior feminine watchfulness, and who, through neglect or carelessness, allows the destroyer to come in and slay. In any case, it certainly promised to be "a very cold day" for Mr. Jack Huysen when these two should meet in Chicago.

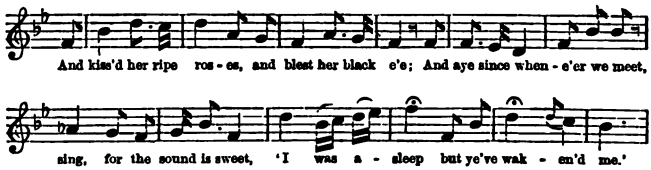
That night, after dinner, father and daughter went out for a stroll; for by this time the moon was drawing to its

full again ; and all the world lay peaceful and silent in the wan clear light. They had not emerged from the trees in front of the inn on to the white pathway of the road when a sound in the distance caught Miss Carry's ears, and instantly she touched her father's arm and drew him back into the shadow. She wanted to hear what song this was that Ronald was singing on his homeward way.

At first she could make out nothing but fragments of the air—clear and soft and distant—



but as he drew nearer the words became more distinct :



So clear and penetrating and careless and joyous was this singing !—her heart was stirred with pride as she listened ; this was not the voice of a man who would trouble himself with any whipper-snapper criticism ;—nay, she began to wonder that she had wasted so much indignation on so trivial a thing. Then there was a sudden silence, except for his footfall ; and presently the dark figure appeared out there on the white road—his shadow a sharp black in front of him, the little terrier trotting behind him—and in a minute or so the long swinging stride had carried him past their ambush on his homeward way to the cottage.

"What a splendid voice that fellow has got ! " her father said, as they also now went out on to the white highway, and took the opposite direction.

"He seems to be very well contented with himself," she said, rather absently.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A LAST DAY ON THE LOCH.

RONALD came down to the loch-side the next morning just as she was about to get into the coble—her father having started a few minutes before.

"I hear you have not been doing very well with the fishing," said he, in that brisk, business-like fashion of his.

"The salmon appear to have gone away somewhere," she replied.

"Oh, but that will never do," said he cheerfully. "We must try and make some alteration."

He took the key of the kennels from his pocket.

"Here, Johnnie lad, ye may go and take the dogs out for a run."

Was Ronald, then, coming with her? Her eyes brightened with anticipation; there was a welcome in the look of her face that ought to have been sufficient reward for him. Nor had she the courage to protest—though she knew that his time was drawing short now. As for the salmon—well, it was not about salmon she was thinking exclusively.

"They say a change of gillie sometimes brings a change of luck," said he good-naturedly; and he began to overhaul the tackle, substituting smaller minnows for those already on. "And I think we will try down at the other end of the loch this time. We will make sure of some trout in any case."

"But it is so far away, Ronald; are you certain you can afford the time?" she was bound, in common fairness, to ask.

"Oh yes, I can afford the time," said he, "even if this should have to be my last day on the loch. Besides, if we do not treat you well, maybe you'll never come back."

"And what is the use of our coming back, when you won't be here?" she was on the point of saying, but she did not say it, fortunately.

Then they set forth, on this still summer-like day; and they hailed the other boat in passing, and told them of their intended voyage of exploration. Indeed their prospects of

sport at the setting out were anything but promising; the long levels of the lake were mostly of a pale glassy blue and white; and the little puffs of wind that stirred the surface here and there into a shimmer of silver invariably died down again, leaving the water to become a mirror once more of rock and tree and hill. But she was well content. This was an unknown world into which they were now penetrating; and it was a good deal more beautiful than the upper end of the lake (where the best fishing ground was) with which they had grown so familiar. Here were hanging woods coming right down to the water's edge; and lofty and precipitous crags stretching away into the pale blue sky; and winding bays and picturesque shores where the huge boulders, green and white and yellow with lichen, and the rich velvet moss, and the withered bracken, and the silver-clear stems of the birch-trees were all brilliant in the sun. The only living creatures that seemed to inhabit this strange silent region were the birds. A pair of eagles slowly circled round and round, but at so great a height that they were but a couple of specks which the eye was apt to lose; black-throated divers and golden-eyed divers, disturbed by these unusual visitors, rose from the water and went whirring by to the upper stretches of the lake; a hen-harrier hovered in mid-air, causing a frantic commotion among the smaller birds beneath; the curlews, now wheeling about in pairs, uttered their long warning whistle; the peewits called angrily, flying zig-zag, with audible whuffing of their soft broad wings; the brilliant little redshanks flew like a flash along the shore, just skimming the water; and two great wild-geese went by overhead, with loud, harsh croak. And ever it was Ronald's keen eye that first caught sight of them; and he would draw her attention to them; and tell her the names of them all. And at last—as they were coming out of one of the small glassy bays, and as he was idly regarding the tall and rocky crags that rose above the birchwoods—he laughed lightly.

"Ye glaiket things," said he, as if he were recognising some old friends, "what brings ye in among the sheep?"

"What is it, Ronald?" she asked—and she followed the direction of his look towards those lofty crags, but could make out nothing unusual.

"Dinna ye see the hinds?" he said quietly.

"Where—where?" she cried, in great excitement; for she had not seen a single deer all the time of her stay.

"At the edge of the brown corrie—near the sky-line. There are three of them—dinna ye see them?"

"No, I don't!" she said impatiently.

"Do ye see the two sheep?"

"I see two white specks—I suppose they're sheep."

"Well—just above them."

But the boat was slowly moving all this time; and presently the gradual change in their position brought one of the hinds clear into view on the sky-line. The beautiful creature, with its graceful neck, small head, and upraised ears, was evidently watching them, but with no apparent intention of making off; and presently Miss Carry, whose eyes were becoming better accustomed to the place, could make out the other two hinds, one of them lying on the grass, the other contentedly feeding, and paying no heed whatever to the passing boat.

"I thought you said the sheep drove them away," she said to him.

"It's the men and the dogs mostly," he answered. "Sometimes they will come in among the sheep like that, if the feeding tempts them. My word, that would be an easy stalk now—if it was the season."

Very soon they found that the three hinds were no longer in view; but there were plenty of other things to claim their attention on this solitary voyage. What, for example, was this great circular mass of stones standing on a projecting promontory? These were the remains, he explained to her, of a Pictish fort. Another, in better preservation, was on the opposite shore; and, if she cared to visit it, she might make her way into the hollow passages constructed between the double line of wall, if she were not afraid of adders, nor yet of some of the uncemented stones falling upon her.

"And what are these?" she said, indicating the ruins of certain circles formed on the hill-plateaux just above the loch.

"They're down in the Ordnance Survey as 'hut-circles,'" he said, "but that is all I know about them."

"At all events, there must have been plenty of people living here at one time?"

"I suppose so."

"Well, I don't think I ever saw any place in our country looking quite so lonely as that," she said, regarding the voiceless solitudes of wood and hill and crag. "Seems as if with us there was always some one around—camping out, or something—but I dare say in Dacotah or Idaho you would get lonelier places than this even. Well, now, what do they call it?" she asked, as an afterthought.

"What?—the strath here?"

"Yes."

"I suppose they would call it part of Strath-Naver."

The mere mention of Strath-Naver struck a chill to her heart. It recalled to her how she had betrayed him by sending those harmless verses across the Atlantic, and subjecting them to the insolence of a nincompoop's patronage. And if Ronald should ever get to know? Might not some busybody send him a copy of the paper? These Scotch people had so many relatives and friends all through the States. Or perhaps his brother in Glasgow might have some correspondent over there? She dared not look him in the face, she felt so guilty; and once or twice she was almost on the point of confessing everything, and begging for his forgiveness, and getting him to promise that he would not read the article should it ever be sent to him.

And then it occurred to her as a very strange thing that from the moment of Ronald's appearance that morning at the loch-side until now she had never even given a thought to what had caused her so much annoyance the day before. His very presence seemed to bring with it an atmosphere of repose and safety and self-confidence. When she had seen him go stalking by on the previous night, she had instantly said to herself—"Oh, that is not the kind of man to worry about what is said of him." And this morning, when he came down to the boat, she had never thought of him as a criticised and suffering poet, but as—well, as the Ronald that all of them knew and were familiar with—self-reliant, good-natured, masterful in his way, and ever ready with a laugh and a song and a jest, save when there was any young lady there, to make him a little more demure

and respectful in his manner. Ronald a disappointed poet? —Ronald suffering agony because a two-for-a-quarter kind of a creature out there in Chicago did not think well of him? She ventured to lift her eyes a little. He was not looking her way at all. He was regarding the shore intently; and there was a quiet and humorous smile on the hard-set, sun-tanned face.

"There are six—seven—blackcocks; do ye see them?"

"Oh yes; what handsome birds they are!" she said, with a curious sense of relief.

"Ay," said he, "the lads are very friendly amongst themselves just now; but soon there will be wars and rumours of wars when they begin to set up house each for himself. There will be many a pitched battle on those knolls there. Handsome? Ay, they're handsome enough; but handsome is as handsome does. The blackcock is not nearly as good a fellow as the grousecock, that stays with his family, and protects them, and gives them the first warning cry if there's danger. These rascals there wander off by themselves, and leave their wives and children to get on as they can. They're handsome—but they're ne'er-do-weels. There's one thing: the villain has a price put on his head; for a man would rather bring down one old cock thumping on the grass than fill his bag with gray hens."

A disappointed poet indeed! And she was so glad to find him talking in his usual half bantering careless fashion (that he should talk in any other way was only a wild suggestion of her own conscience, struck with a qualm on the mention of Strath-Naver) that she made many inquiries about the habits of black game and similar creatures; and was apparently much interested; and all the while was vowing within herself that she would think no more of the mortifying disappointment she had met with, but would give up this last day on the loch wholly to such fancies and quiet amusements as she would like to look back upon in after hours.

And a very pleasant day they spent in this still, silent, beautiful region, cut off from all of the world, as it were. There were plenty of trout, and therefore there was plenty of occupation; moreover, one or two good-sized sea-trout added to the value of the basket. Nor was this solitary

district quite so untenanted as she had supposed. About mid-day it occurred to her that she was becoming hungry; and then the wild reflection flashed on her that the lunch was in the other boat—some eight miles away. She confided her perplexity—her despair—to Ronald.

"It is my fault," he said, with vexation very visible in his face. "I should have remembered. But—but—" he added timidly—for he was not accustomed to ministering to the wants of young ladies—"I could get ye some bread and a drink of milk, if that would do."

"What, right here?"

"Yes."

"Why, nothing could be better!"

They were rowing the boat ashore by this time; and when they had got to land, he leaped on to the beach, and presently disappeared. In little more than a quarter of an hour he was back again, bringing with him a substantial loaf of home-made bread and a large jug of milk.

"Well done!" she said. "There's plenty for all of us. Lend me your knife, Ronald."

"Oh no," said he, "it's for you."

And a hard fight she had of it ere she could get the two men to accept a fair division; but she had her way in the end; and Ronald, seeing that she was determined they should share the milk also (she drank first, and handed the jug to him quite as a matter of course), swiftly and stealthily pulled off the cup from his whisky-flask, and old Malcolm and he drank from that, pouring the milk into it from the jug. It was a frugal picnic; but she was very happy; and she was telling him that when he came to Chicago, and they were showing him the beauties of Lake Michigan, they might give him a grander luncheon than this, but none more comfortable.

In the afternoon they set out for home, picking up a few more trout by the way; and when they at length drew near to the upper waters of the lake they found the other boat still pursuing its unwearied round. Moreover Mr. Hodson's strict attention to business had been rewarded by the capture of a handsome fish of sixteen pounds; whereas they had nothing but a miscellaneous collection of brown and white trout. But, just as they were thinking of

going ashore, for the dusk was now coming on, a most extraordinary piece of luck befell them. Miss Carry was scarcely thinking of the rods when the sudden shriek of one of the reels startled her out of her idle contemplation.

"Surely that is a salmon, Ronald!" she cried, as she instantly grasped the rod and got it up.

He did not stay to answer, for his business was to get in the other line as fast as possible. But he had just got this second rod into his hand when lo! there was a tugging and another scream of a reel—there was now a salmon at each of the lines! It was a position of the direst danger—for a single cross rush of either of the fish must inevitably break both off—and how were they to be kept separate, with both rods confined to one boat? Ronald did not lose his head.

"Row ashore, Malcolm—row ashore, man!" he shouted—"fast as ever ye can, man!"

Nor did he wait until the bow had touched land; he slipped over the edge of the boat while as yet the water was deep enough to take him up to the waist; and away he waded, taking the one rod with him, and slowly increasing the distance between the two fish. By the time he got ashore there was a hundred yards or so between them, and he did not attempt to play this salmon at all; he gave it plenty of law; and merely waited to see the end of Miss Carry's struggle.

She hardly knew what had happened, except that Ronald's going away had left her very nervous and excited and helpless. How was she ever to land a fish unless he was at her shoulder directing her? But by this time old Malcolm had jammed the bow of the boat on to the beach, had got in the oars, and now sate patiently waiting, clip in hand.

The fish was not a very game one, though he was no kelt.

"Put a good strain on him, Miss," said old Malcolm—who had been taking a sly look round. "Ronald's keeping the other one for ye."

"What do you say?" she called to him—rather breathlessly.

"Ronald will be wanting ye to play the other fish too," said the old man. "And a wonderful fine thing, if we can get them both—oh yes, indeed. It is not an ordinary

thing to hook two salmon at once and land them both—I wass neffer seeing that done except once before."

"Beast!" she said, between her teeth—for the fish made a desperate rush away out into the loch, with a magnificent flourish in the air as a finish. But no harm was done; indeed, it was about his last strong effort to free himself. Yard after yard of the line was got in again; his struggles to get away grew less and less vigorous; at last the old Highlander made an adventurous swoop with the clip, and was successful in landing the brilliant creature in the bottom of the boat.

"Now, Miss," he cried, "leave him to me—leave him to me. Quick, get ashore, and try for the other one. And will you take the clip?"

He was greatly excited by this unusual adventure; and so was she—and breathless, moreover; but she managed to do as she was bid. She got rather wet in getting ashore; for Ronald was not there to help her; but she had no time to mind that; she made her way as rapidly as she could along the bank, and there was Ronald awaiting her, with a quiet smile on his face.

"This is better work," said he placidly, as he gave her the rod.

She was anxious no longer; she was triumphant. Ronald was with her; of course she would get this one also. And who but Ronald would have brought such a stroke of luck to the boat?

"I would get in some of the line now," said he calmly. "I have been letting him do as he liked; and he is a long way out. And mind, you'll have to watch him; he is quite fresh; there has been no fighting at all yet."

"Oh, Ronald," she said, with the pretty pale face grown quite rosy with the excitement and the hard work, "won't it be just too splendid for anything if we can get them both!"

"I hope ye may," he said, "for it's not likely to happen again in your lifetime."

The fish now began to rebel against the new strain that was being put on him, and indulged in a variety of audacious cantrips—apparently at a considerable distance out. By this time the other boat was also ashore, and Miss Carry's

father came along to see how Ronald's pupil could play a salmon. Just as he drew near, there was a pretty lively scrimmage going on.

"Why, you want to have them all," he complained. "It is not fair sport to bag a brace of salmon right and left."

She did not answer—in fact, she could not; she had enough to do. For now the salmon seemed wanting to get right out to the middle of the lake; and the length of line that lay between her and her enemy dragged heavily on her arms. And then he altered his tactics—coming rapidly to the surface and trying to break the suddenly slackened line by furious lashings of his tail. But all this was in vain; and now, as he seemed yielding a little, she put a heavier strain on him, and began to reel up. It was very well done, and without a word of admonition; for Ronald was proud of his pupil, and wished to show that he could leave her to herself.

By and by the fish began to show himself a little more amenable, and preparations were made for receiving him on shore. Miss Carry stepped back a few yards; her father got out of the way altogether; Ronald crouched down, clip in hand. Of course, when the salmon found himself being guided into the shallows, he was off like a bolt; and again and again he repeated these sullen rushes; but each time they were growing weaker; and at last, as the gleam of something white showed in the water, Ronald made a sudden plunge with the clip—and the salmon was ashore.

He laughed.

"I suppose this will be my last day on the loch, and a very good finish it is."

The men brought along the other fish, and these were all laid out on the grass side by side, though it was now too dark to see much of them. As regards the three salmon, Mr. Hodson's, on being accurately weighed, was found to be sixteen and a half pounds, Miss Carry's two respectively fourteen pounds and eleven pounds. She was a very happy young woman as she walked home with her father and Ronald through the now rapidly gathering dusk.

His last day on the lake:—well, it would be something pleasant to look back upon in after times—the summer-like weather, the still water, the silent and sunlit crags and woods

and bays. And perhaps, too, he would remember something of her bright society, her friendly disposition, and the frank good-comradeship with which she shared her meal of milk and bread with two common boatmen. Nay, he could not well help remembering that—and with a touch of gratitude and kindness, too—even though they should never meet again through the long years of life.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE PARTING.

Now amid all his preparations for departure nothing distressed him so much as the difficulty he found in trying to write something worthy of being placed in Meenie's book. It was to be his last gift to her; she herself had asked for it; surely he ought to do his best? And perhaps it was this very anxiety that baffled him. Even of such small lyrical faculty as he possessed, he was in no sense the master. He could write easily enough at the instigation of some passing fancy; but the fancy had to come uncalled-for; it was not of his summoning. And now, in this hour of direst need, no kindly Ariel would come to help him. Walking across the lonely moors, with the dogs for his sole companions, or lying on a far hillside, and tearing twigs of heather with his teeth, he worried his brain for a subject, and all to no purpose. Perhaps, if praise of Meenie had been permissible—if he could have dared to write anything about herself in her own book—he might have found the task more easy; for that was the one direction in which his imagination was always facile enough. One morning, indeed, when he was coming down the Clebrig slopes, he saw Miss Carry and Meenie walking together along the road; and he had not much difficulty in shaping out some such verses as these—jingling the rhymes together without much concern about the sense, and then scribbling the result on the back of an envelope to see how it looked:

By Mudal's river she idly strayed,
And drank afresh the morning breeze:
Tell me, you beautiful dark-eyed maid,
That's come across the Atlantic seas—

See you our winsome Sutherland flower,
Her cheek the tint of the summer rose,
Her gold-brown hair her only dower,
Her soul as white as Ben Clebrig's snows;

Blue as the ruffled loch her eyes,
Sweet her breath as the blossoming heather:
O do you think the whole world's skies
Can see aught fairer than you together?

Sisters twain—one slender and dark,
Her cheek faint-tanned by the tropic south;
One Northern bred, her voice like a lark,
The joy of the hills in her gladsome youth.

Ben Clebrig shall judge—nay, shall keep the two,
And bind them in chains of love for ever;
Look to it, Clebrig; guard them true:
Sisters twain—and why should they sever?

But even here there was a false note; and he knew it. Perhaps he was vaguely jealous of any alien interference: was not Meenie the sole and only care of the giant mountain? Anyhow, the verses were of no avail for Meenie's book; and otherwise he did not care for them; so the envelope was crumpled up and thrown away.

On the evening before the brother and sister were to leave for the south, Meenie came along to see them. Ronald had got quite accustomed to find Miss Douglas in the house of late; for Maggie needed a good deal of direction and help—the tearful little lass being sorely distraught at the thought of going away. But on this occasion it was himself she had come to seek.

"I have made a little drawing for you, Ronald," said she—and the beautiful Highland eyes were downcast a little—"as well as I could, of the loch and the hills and the river; and I want you to take it to Glasgow with you, and put it on the mantelpiece of your room, and then sometimes it will make you think of the old place and of us all."

"I'm sure it will not need a picture to make me do that," said he, "but all the same I am obliged to ye, and it will be the chief treasure in the house——"

"Oh no, oh no," she said, with a rueful smile—and she ventured to raise her eyes. "You must not think it a picture at all—but only a few lines scribbled on a paper-

knife to make you remember the place when you happen to find it lying about. And you must not look at it until I have gone, because you would feel bound to praise it; and that would be as awkward for you as for me—for indeed it is nothing at all. And here," she added, producing a small slip of paper, "is my sister's address in Glasgow; and I have written to her; and she will be very glad if you will call on them when you have the time."

"I don't know how to thank ye," said he. "It's when people are going away that they find out how many friends they are leaving behind."

"In your case," said she, very modestly and prettily, "it is not difficult to count—you have only to say the whole country-side." And then she added: "I heard of the lads that came all the way from Tongue."

"The wild fellows!—they had a long tramp here and back home again."

She looked at him rather hesitatingly.

"There will be a great many coming to see you off to-morrow morning, Ronald," she said.

"I should think not—I should think not," he said.

"Oh, but I know there will be. Every one is talking of it. And I was thinking—if it was not too much trouble—if you were not too busy—I was wondering if you would come along and say good-bye to my father and mother this evening—I would rather have that than—than—with a crowd of people standing by——"

"Oh yes, certainly," he said, at once. "When will I come? Now, if ye like."

"And Maggie too?"

"Yes, yes, why not?"

"And about my album, Ronald?"

"Well," said he, with not a little embarrassment, "I have not written anything in it yet; but I will give it to you in the morning; and—and if there's nothing in it, then ye must just understand that I could not get anything good enough, and I will send something from Glasgow——"

"Indeed no," said she promptly. "Why should you trouble about a thing like that? Write your name in the book, Ronald, and that will be enough."

The three of them now went outside, and the door was

shut behind them. It was a beautiful night; the moon was slowly rising over the solitudes of Strath-Terry; and the lake was like a sheet of silver. They were rather silent as they walked along the gray highway; to-morrow was to make a difference to all of their lives.

When they reached the Doctor's cottage, and when Ronald and Maggie were ushered into the parlour, it was clear that the visit had been expected; for there was cake on the table, and there were plates and knives, and a decanter of sherry, and a number of wine-glasses. And not only was the big good-humoured Doctor as friendly as ever, but even the awe-inspiring little Dresden-china lady condescended, in these unusual circumstances, to be gracious. Of course the talk was all about Ronald's going away, and his prospects in Glasgow, and so forth; and Mrs. Douglas took care to impress him with the fact that, on the occasion of Lord Ailine having recently spent an evening with them, his lordship had distinctly approved of the step Ronald had taken, and hoped it might turn out well in every way.

"Will there be any office work, Ronald?" the Doctor asked.

"I suppose so, for a time."

"You'll not like that, my lad."

"I'll have to take what comes, like other folk," was the simple answer.

How pretty Meenie was on this last evening! She did not say much; and she hardly ever looked at him; but her presence, then as ever, seemed to bring with it an atmosphere of gentleness and sweetness; and when, by chance, she did happen to regard him, there was a kind of magic wonder in her eyes that for the moment rather bedazzled him and made his answers to these good people's inquiries somewhat inconsecutive. For they were curious to know about his plans and schemes; and showed much interest in his welfare; while all the time he sate thinking of how strange Glasgow would be without the chance of catching a glimpse of Meenie anywhere; and wondering whether his dream-sweetheart—the imaginary Meenie whom he courted and wooed and won in these idle verses of his—would be nearer to him there, or would fade gradually away and finally disappear.

"In any case, Ronald," said Mrs. Douglas—and she thus addressed him for the first time, "you have a good friend in his lordship."

"I know that."

"I suppose I am breaking no confidence," continued the little dame, in her grand way, "in saying that he plainly intimated to us his willingness, supposing that you were not as successful as we all hope you may be—I say, his lordship plainly intimated to us that he would always have a place open for you somewhere."

"Yes, I think he would do that," Ronald said; "but when a man has once put his hand to the plough he must not go back."

And perhaps, for one feeble moment of indecision, he asked himself what had ever tempted him to put his hand to the plough, and to go away from this quiet security and friendliness and peace. But it was only for a moment. Of course, all that had been argued out before. The step had been taken; forwards, and not backwards, he must go. Still, to be sitting in this quiet little room—with the strange consciousness that Meenie was so near—watching the nimble, small fingers busy with her knitting—and wondering when she would raise those beautiful, deep, tender, clear eyes; and to think that on the morrow hour after hour would be placing a greater and greater distance between him and the possibility of any such another evening—nay, that it was not only miles but years, and perhaps a whole lifetime, that he was placing between her and him—that was no joyful kind of a fancy. If it had been Meenie who was going away, that would have been easier to bear.

> *"Call her back, Clebrig; Mudal, call;*
> *Ere all of the young springtime be flown"*

he would have cried to hill and river and loch and glen, knowing that sooner or later Love Meenie would come back from Glasgow Town. But his own going away was very different—and perhaps a final thing.

By and by he rose, and begged to be excused. Maggie might stay for a while longer with Miss Douglas, if she liked; as for him, he had some matters to attend to. And so they bade him good-bye, and wished him well, and hoped

to hear all good things of him. Thus they parted; and he went out by himself into the clear moonlight night.

But he did not go home. A strange unrest and longing had seized him; a desire to be alone with the silence of the night; perhaps some angry impatience that he could not make out so much as a few trivial verses for this beautiful girl-friend whom he might never see again. He could write about his dream-sweetheart easily enough; and was there to be never a word for Meenie herself? So he walked down to the river; and wandered along the winding and marshy banks—startling many wildfowl the while—until he reached the lake. There he launched one of the cobles, and pulled out to the middle of the still sheet of water; and took the oars in again. By this time the redshank and curlews and plover had quieted down once more; there was a deadly stillness all around; and he had persuaded himself that he had only come to have a last look at the hills and the loch and the moorland wastes that Meenie had made magical for him in the years now left behind; and to bid farewell to these; and carry away in his memory a beautiful picture of them.

It was a lonely and a silent world. There was not a sound save the distant murmur of a stream; no breath of wind came down from the Clebrig slopes to ruffle the broad silver sweeps of moonlight on the water; the tiny hamlet half hidden among the trees gave no sign of life. The cottage he had left—the white front of it now palely clear in the distance—seemed a ghostly thing: a small, solitary, forsaken thing, in the midst of this vast amphitheatre of hills that stood in awful commune with the stars. On such a night the wide and vacant spaces can readily become peopled; phantoms issue from the shadows of the woods and grow white in the open; an unknown wind may arise, bringing with it strange singing from the northern seas. And if he forgot the immediate purpose of the verses that he wanted; if he forgot that he must not mention the name of Meenie; if he saw only the little cottage, and the moonlit loch, and the giant bulk of Clebrig that was keeping guard over the sleeping hamlet, and watching that no sprites or spectres should work their evil charms within reach of Meenie's half-listening ear—well, it was all a fire in his

blood and his brain, and he could not stay to consider. The phantom-world was revealed; the silence now was filled as with a cry from the lone seas of the far north; and, all impatient and eager and half bewildered, he seemed to press forward to seize those visions and that weird music ere both should vanish and be mute :—

The moonlight lies on Loch Naver,
And the night is strange and still;
And the stars are twinkling coldly
Above the Clebrig hill.

And there by the side of the water,
O what strange shapes are these?
O these are the wild witch-maidens
Down from the northern seas.

And they stand in a magic circle,
Pale in the moonlight sheen;
And each has over her forehead
A star of golden green.

O what is their song?—of sailors
That never again shall sail;
And the music sounds like the sobbing
And sighing that brings a gale.

But who is she who comes yonder?—
And all in white is she;
And her eyes are open, but nothing
Of the outward world can she see.

O haste you back, Meenie, haste you,
And haste to your bed again;
For these are the wild witch-maidens
Down from the northern main.

They open the magic circle;
They draw her into the ring;
They kneel before her, and slowly
A strange, sad song they sing—

A strange, sad song—as of sailors
That never again shall sail;
And the music sounds like the sobbing
And sighing that brings a gale.

O haste you back, Meenie, haste you,
And haste to your bed again;
For these are the wild witch-maidens
Down from the northern main.

"O come with us, rose-white Meenie,
To our sea-halls draped with green;
O come with us, rose-white Meenie,
And be our rose-white queen!

"And you shall have robes of splendour,
With shells and pearls bestrewn;
And a sceptre olden and golden,
And a rose-white coral throne.

"And by day you will hear the music
Of the ocean come nigher and nigher;
And by night you will see your palace
Ablaze with phosphor fire.

"O come with us, rose-white Meenie,
To our sea-halls draped with green;
O come with us, rose-white Meenie,
And be our rose-white queen!"

But Clebrig heard; and the thunder
Down from his iron hand sped;
And the band of the wild witch-maidens
One swift shriek uttered, and fled.

And Meenie awoke, and terror
And wonder were in her eyes;
And she looked at the moon-white valley,
And she looked to the starlit skies.

O haste you back, Meenie, haste you,
And haste to your bed again;
For these are the wild witch-maidens
Down from the northern main.

O hear you not yet their singing
Come faintly back on the breeze?—
The song of the wild witch-sisters
As they fly to the Iceland seas.

O hark—'tis a sound like the sobbing
And sighing that brings a gale:
A low, sad song—as of sailors
That never again shall sail!

Slowly he pulled in to the shore again, and fastened up the boat; and slowly he walked away through the silent and moonlit landscape, revolving these verses in his mind, but not trying in the least to estimate their value, supposing them to have any at all. Even when he had got home, and in the stillness of his own room—for by this time Maggie

had gone to bed—was writing out the lines, with apparent ease enough, on a large sheet of paper, it was with no kind of critical doubt or anxiety. He could not have written them otherwise; probably he knew he was not likely to make them any better by over-refining them. And the reason why he put them down on the large sheet of paper was that Meenie's name occurred in them; and she might not like that familiarity to appear in her album; he would fold the sheet of paper and place it in the book, and she could let it remain there or burn it as she chose. And then he went and had his supper, which Maggie had left warm by the fire, and thereafter lit a pipe—or rather two or three pipes, as it befell, for this was the last night before his leaving Inver-Mudal, and there were many dreams and reveries (and even fantastic possibilities) to be dismissed for ever.

The next morning, of course, there was no time or room for poetic fancies. When he had got Maggie to take along the little book to the Doctor's cottage, he set about making his final preparations, and here he was assisted by his successor, one Peter Munro. Finally he went to say good-bye to the dogs.

"Good-bye, doggies, good-bye," said he, as they came bounding to the front of the kennel, pawing at him through the wooden bars, and barking and whining, and trying to lick his hand. "Good-bye, Bess! Good-bye, Lugar—lad, lad, we've had many a day on the hill together."

And then he turned sharply to his companion.

"Ye'll not forget what I told you about that dog, Peter?"

"I will not," said the other.

"If I thought that dog was not to be looked after, I would get out my rifle this very minute and put a bullet through his head—though it would cost me £7. Mind what I've told ye now; if he's not fed separate, he'll starve; he's that gentle and shy that he'll not go near the trough when the others are feeding. And a single cross word on the hill will spoil him for the day—mind you tell any strange gentlemen that come up with his lordship—some o' them keep roaring at dogs as if they were bull-calves. There's not a better setter in the county of Sutherland than that old Lugar—but he wants civil treatment."

"I'll look after him, never fear, Ronald," his companion said. "And now come away, man. Ye've seen to everything; and the mail-gig will be here in half an hour."

Ronald was still patting the dogs' heads, and talking to them—he seemed loth to leave them.

"Come away, man," his companion urged. "All the lads are at the inn, and they want to have a parting glass with you. Your sister and every one is there, and everything is ready."

"Very well," said he, and he turned away rather moodily.

But when they were descended from the little plateau into the highway he saw that Meenie Douglas was coming along the road—and rather quickly; and for a minute he hesitated, lest she should have some message for him.

"Oh, Ronald," she said, and he hardly noticed that her face was rather pale and anxious, "I wanted to thank you—I could not let you go away without thanking you—it—it is so beautiful——"

"I should beg your pardon," said he, with his eyes cast down, "for making use of your short name——"

"But, Ronald," she said very bravely (though after a moment's hesitation, as if she had to nerve herself), "whenever you think of any of us here, I hope you will think of me by that name always—and now, good-bye!"

He lifted his eyes to hers for but a second—for but a second only, and yet, perhaps, with some sudden and unforeseen and farewell message on his part, and on hers some swift and not overglad guessing.

"Good-bye!"

They shook hands in silence, and then she turned and went away; and he rejoined his companion and then they went on together. But Meenie did not re-enter the cottage. She stole away down to the river, and lingered by the bridge, listening. For there were faint sounds audible in the still morning air.

The mail-cart from the north came rattling along, and crossed the bridge, and went on towards the inn, and again there was silence, but for these faint sounds. And now she could make out the thin echoes of the pipes—no doubt one of the young lads was playing—*Lochiel's away to*

France, perhaps, or *A Thousand Blessings*, for surely no one, on such an occasion, would think of *Macrimmon's Lament*—

> "*Macrimmon shall no more return*
> *Oh! never, never more return!*"

It would be something joyous they were playing there to speed him on his way; and the "drink at the door"—the *Deoch an Dhoruis*—would be going the round; and many would be the hand-shaking and farewell. And then, by and by, as she sate there all alone and listening, she heard a faint sound of cheering—and that was repeated, in a straggling sort of fashion; and thereafter there was silence.

The mail-cart had driven away for the south.

Nor even now did she go back to the cottage. She wandered away through the wild moorland wastes—hour after hour, and aimlessly; and when, by chance, a shepherd or crofter came along the road, she left the highway and went aside among the heather, pretending to seek for wild-flowers or the like: for sometimes, if not always, there was that in the beautiful, tender Highland eyes which she would have no stranger see.

CHAPTER XXV.

SOUTHWARDS.

As for him, it was a sufficiently joyous departure; for some of the lads about were bent on accompanying him on the mail-car as far as Lairg; and they took with them John Macalpine and his weather-worn pipes to cheer them by the way; and at Crask they each and all of them had a glass of whisky; and on the platform at Lairg railway-station the clamour of farewell was great. And even when he had got quit of that noisy crew, and was in the third-class compartment, and thundering away to the south, his thoughts and fancies were eager and ardent and glad enough; and his brain was busy with pictures; and these were altogether of a joyful and hopeful kind. Already he saw himself on that wide estate—somewhere or other in the Highlands he fondly trusted; draining and planting

and enclosing here; there pruning and thinning and felling; manufacturing charcoal and tar; planning temporary roads and bridges; stacking bark and faggots; or discussing with the head-keeper as to the desirability or non-desirability of reintroducing capercailzie. And if the young American lady and her father should chance to come that way, would he not have pleasure and pride in showing them over the place?—nay, his thoughts went farther afield, and he saw before him Chicago, with its masts and its mighty lake, and himself not without a friendly grip of welcome on getting there. As for Meenie, where would she be in those coming and golden and as yet distant days? Far away from him, no doubt; and what else could he expect?—for now he saw her among the fine folk assembled at the shooting-lodge in Glengask—and charming all of them with her sweet and serious beauty and her gentle ways—and again he pictured her seated on the white deck of Sir Alexander's yacht, a soft south wind filling the sails, and the happy gray-blue Highland eyes looking forward contentedly enough to the yellow line of the Orosay shore. That was to be her future—fair and shining; for always he had associated Meenie with beautiful things—roses, the clear tints of the dawn, the singing of a lark in the blue; and who could doubt that her life would continue so, through these bright and freshly-coming years?

Yes, it was a glad enough departure for him; for he was busy and eager, and only anxious to set to work at once. But by and by, when the first novelty and excitement of the travelling was beginning to wear off, he suddenly discovered that the little Maggie, seated in the corner there, was stealthily crying.

"What, what, lass?" said he cheerfully. "What is it now?"

She did not answer; and so he had to set to work to comfort her; making light of the change; painting in glowing colours all that lay before them; and promising that she should write to Miss Douglas a complete account of all her adventures in the great city. He was not very successful, for the little lass was sorely grieved over the parting from the few friends she had in the world; but at least it was an occupation; and perhaps in convincing her

he was likewise convincing himself that all was for the best, and proving that people should be well content to leave the monotony and dulness of a Highland village for the wide opportunities of Glasgow.

But even he, with all his eager hopes and ambitions, was chilled to the heart when at last they drew near to the giant town. They had spent the night in Inverness, for he had some business to transact there on behalf of Lord Ailine; and now it was afternoon—an afternoon dull and dismal, with an east wind blowing that made even the outlying landscape they had come through dreary and hopeless. Then, as they got nearer to the city, such suggestions of the country as still remained grew more and more grim; there were patches of sour-looking grass surrounded by damp stone walls; gaunt buildings soot-begrimed and gloomy; and an ever-increasing blue-gray mist pierced by tall chimneys that were almost spectral in the dulled light. He had been to Glasgow before, but chiefly on one or two swift errands connected with guns and game and fishing-rods; and he did not remember having found it so very melancholy-looking a place as this was. He was rather silent as he got ready for leaving the train.

He found his brother Andrew awaiting them; and he had engaged a cab, for a slight drizzle had begun. Moreover, he said he had secured for Ronald a lodging right opposite the station; and thither the younger brother forthwith transferred his things; then he came down the hollow-resounding stone stair again, and got into the cab, and set out for the Reverend Andrew's house, which was on the south side of the city.

And what a fierce and roaring Maelstrom was this into which they now were plunged! The dusky crowds of people, the melancholy masses of dark-hued buildings, the grimy flagstones, all seemed more or less phantasmal through the gray veil of mist and smoke; but always there arose the harsh and strident rattle of the tram-cars and the waggons and carts — a confused, commingled, unending din that seemed to fill the brain somehow and bewilder one. It appeared a terrible place this, with its cold gray streets and hazy skies, and its drizzle of rain; when, in course of time, they crossed a wide bridge, and caught a

glimpse of the river and the masts and funnels of some ships and steamers, these were all ghost-like in the thin, ubiquitous fog. Ronald did not talk much, for the unceasing turmoil perplexed and confused him; and so the stout, phlegmatic minister, whose bilious-hued face and gray eyes were far from being unkindly in their expression, addressed himself mostly to the little Maggie, and said that Rosina and Alexandra and Esther and their brother James were all highly pleased that she was coming to stay with them, and also assured her that Glasgow did not always look so dull and miserable as it did then.

At length they stopped in front of a house in a long, unlovely, neutral-tinted street; and presently two rather weedy-looking girls, who turned out to be Rosina and Alexandra, were at the door, ready to receive the new-comers. Of course it was Maggie who claimed their first attention; and she was carried off to her own quarters to remove the stains of travel (and of tears) from her face; as for Ronald, he was ushered at once into the parlour, where his sister-in-law — a tall, thin woman, with a lachrymose face, but with sufficiently watchful eyes—greeted him in a melancholy way, and sighed, and introduced him to the company. That consisted of a Mr. M'Lachlan—a large, pompous-looking person, with a gray face and short-cropped white hair, whose cool stare of observation and lofty smile of patronage instantly made Ronald say to himself, "My good friend, we shall have to put you into your proper place;" Mrs. M'Lachlan, an insignificant woman, dowdily dressed; and finally, Mr. Weems, a little, old, withered man, with a timid and appealing look coming from under bushy black eyebrows—though the rest of his hair was gray. This Mr. Weems, as Ronald knew, was in a kind of fashion to become his coach. The poor old man had been half-killed in a railway accident; had thus been driven from active duty; and now, with a shattered constitution and a nervous system all gone to bits, managed to live somehow on the interest of the compensation-sum awarded him by the railway-company. He did not look much of a hardy forester; but if his knowledge of land and timber measuring and surveying, and of book-keeping and accounts, was such as to enable him to give this stalwart

pupil a few practical lessons, so far well; and even the moderate recompense would doubtless be a welcome addition to his income.

And now this high occasion was to be celebrated by a "meat-tea," for the Reverend Andrew was no stingy person, though his wife had sighed and sighed again over the bringing into the house of a new mouth to feed. Maggie came downstairs, accompanied by the other members of the family; Mr. M'Lachlan was invited to sit at his hostess's right hand; the others of them took their seats in due course; and the minister pronounced a long and formal blessing, which was not without a reference or two to the special circumstances of their being thus brought together. And if the good man spoke apparently under the assumption that the Deity had a particular interest in this tea-meeting in Abbotsford Place, it was assuredly without a thought of irreverence; to himself the occasion was one of importance; and the way of his life led him to have continual—and even familiar—communion with the unseen Powers.

But it was not Ronald's affairs that were to be the staple of conversation at this somewhat melancholy banquet. It very soon appeared that Mr. M'Lachlan was an elder — and a ruling elder, unmistakably — of Andrew Strang's church, and he had come prepared with a notable proposal for wiping off the debt of the same.

"Ah'm not wan that'll gang back from his word," he said, in his pompous and raucous voice, and he leaned back in his chair, and crossed his hands over his capacious black satin waistcoat, and gazed loftily on his audience. "Wan hundred pounds—there it is, as sure as if it was in my pocket this meenit—and there it'll be when ye get fower ither members o' the congregation to pit doon their fifty pounds apiece. Not but that there's several in the church abler than me to pit doon as much; but ye ken how it is, Mr. Strang, the man makes the money and the woman spends it; and there's mair than one family we ken o' that should come forrit on an occasion like this, but that the money rins through the fingers o' a feckless wife. What think ye, noo, o' Mrs. Nicol setting up her pownyearriage, and it's no nine years since Geordie had to make

a composition? And they tell me that Mrs. Paton's lasses, when they gang doon the watter—and not for one month in the year will they let that house o' theirs at Dunoon—they tell me that the pairties and dances they have is jist extraordinar' and the wastry beyond a' things. Ay, it's them that save and scrimp and deny themselves that's expected to do everything in a case like this—notwithstanding it's a public debt—mind, it's a public debt, binding on the whole congregation; but what ah say ah'll stand to—there's wan hundred pounds ready, when there's fower ithers wi' fifty pounds apiece—that's three hundred pounds—and wi' such an example before them, surely the rest o' the members will make up the remaining two hundred and fifty—surely, surely."

"It's lending to the Lord," said the minister's wife sadly as she passed the marmalade to the children.

The conversation now took the form of a discussion as to which of the members might reasonably be expected to come forward at such a juncture; and as Ronald had no part or interest in this matter he made bold to turn to Mr. Weems, who sate beside him, and engage him in talk on their own account. Indeed, he had rather taken a liking for this timorous little man, and wished to know more about him and his belongings and occupations; and when Mr. Weems revealed to him the great trouble of his life—the existence of a shrill-voiced chanticleer in the backyard of the cottage adjoining his own, out somewhere in the Pollokshaws direction—Ronald was glad to come to his help at once.

"Oh, that's all right," said he. "I'll shoot him for you."

But this calm proposal was like to drive the poor little man daft with terror. His nervous system suffered cruelly from the skirling of the abominable fowl; but even that was to be dreaded less than a summons and a prosecution and a deadly feud with his neighbour, who was a drunken, quarrelsome, cantankerous shoemaker.

"But, God bless me," Ronald said, "it's not to be thought of that any human being should be tortured like that by a brute beast. Well, there's another way o' settling the hash o' that screeching thing. You just go and buy a pea-shooter—or if one of the laddies will lend you a tin-whistle, that

will do; then go and buy twopence-worth of antibilious pills—indeed, I suppose any kind would serve; and then fire half a dozen over into the back-yard; my word, when the bantam gentleman has picked up these bonny looking peas, and swallowed them, he'll no be for flapping his wings and crowing, I'm thinking; he'll rather be for singing the tune of 'Annie Laurie.' But maybe you're not a good shot with a pea-shooter? Well, I'll come over and do it for you early some morning, when the beast's hungry."

But it was difficult for any one to talk, even in the most subdued and modest way, with that harsh and strident voice laying down the law at the head of the table. And now the large-waistcoated elder was on the subject of the temperance movement; arraigning the government for not suppressing the liquor-traffic altogether; denouncing the callous selfishness of those who were inclined to temporise with the devil, and laying at their door all the misery caused by the drunkenness of their fellow-creatures; and proudly putting in evidence his own position in the city of Glasgow—his authority in the church—the regard paid to his advice—and the solid, substantial slice of the world's gear that he possessed—as entirely due to the fact that he had never, not even as a young man, imbibed one drop of alcohol. Now Ronald Strang was ordinarily a most abstemious person—and no credit to him, nor to any one in the like case; for his firm physique and his way of living hitherto had equally rendered him independent of any such artificial aid (though a glass of whisky on a wet day on the hillside did not come amiss to him, and his hard head could steer him safely through a fair amount of jollification when those wild lads came down from Tongue). But he was irritated by that loud and raucous voice; he resented the man's arrogance and his domineering over the placid and phlegmatic Andrew, who scarcely opened his mouth; and here and there he began to put in a sharp saying or two that betokened discontent and also a coming storm. "They used to say that cleanliness was next to godliness; but nowadays ye would put total abstinence half a mile ahead of it," he would say, or something of the kind; and in due course these two were engaged in a battle-royal of discussion. It shall not be put down here; for who was

ever convinced—in morals, or art, or literature, or anything else—by an argument? it needs only be said that the elder, being rather hard pressed, took refuge in Scriptural authority. But alas! this was not of much avail; for the whole family of the East Lothian farmer (not merely the student one of them) had been brought up with exceeding care, and taught to give chapter and verse for everything; so that when Mr. M'Lachlan sought to crush his antagonist with the bludgeon of quotation he found it was only a battledore he had got hold of.

"'Wine is a mocker; strong drink is raging; and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise,'" he would say severely.

"'Wine which cheereth God and man,'" the other would retort. "'Wine that maketh glad the heart of man.' What make ye of these?"

"'Who hath woe? who hath sorrow? who hath babbling?—they that tarry long at the wine; they that go to seek mixed wine.' What better authority can we have?"

"Ay, man, the wise king said that; but it wasna his last word. 'Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those that be of heavy hearts. Let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more.'"

"The devil quoting Scripture for his own ends," the Reverend Andrew interposed, with a mild facetiousness.

"It's a dreadful thing to hear in a minister's house," said the minister's wife, appealing to her neighbour, Mrs. M'Lachlan.

"What is? A verse from the Proverbs of Solomon?" Ronald said, turning to her quite good-naturedly.

But instantly he saw that she was distressed, and even more lachrymose than ever; and he knew that nothing would convince her that he was not a child of wrath and of the devil; and he reproached himself for having entered into any discussion of any kind whatever in this house, where Maggie was to live—he hoped in perfect accord and amity. As for himself, he wished only to be out of it. He was not in his right element. The vulgar complacency of the rich elder irritated him; the melancholy unreason of his sister-in-law depressed him. He foresaw that not here

was any abiding-place for him while he sojourned in the great city.

But how was he to get away? They lingered and dawdled over their tea-drinking in a most astonishing fashion; his brother being the most intemperate of all of them, and obviously accounting thereby for his pallid and bilious cheeks. Moreover, they had returned to that fruitful topic of talk—the capability of this or the other member of the congregation to subscribe to the fund for paying off the debt on the church; and as this involved a discussion of everybody's ways and means, and of his expenditure, and the manner of living of himself, his wife, his sons, and daughters and servants, the very air seemed thick with trivial and envious tittle-tattle, the women-folk, of course, being more loquacious than any.

"Lord help us," said Ronald to himself, as he sate there in silence, "this house would be a perfect paradise for an Income-tax Commissioner."

However, the fourth or fifth tea-pot was exhausted at last; the minister offered up a prolonged thanksgiving; and Ronald thought that now he might get away—and out into the freer air. But that was not to be as yet. His brother observed that it was getting late; that all the members of the household were gathered together; and they might appropriately have family worship now. So the two servant-girls were summoned in to clear the table, and that done, they remained; the minister brought the family Bible over from the sideboard; and all sate still and attentive, their books in their hand, while he sought out the chapter he wanted. It was the Eighth of the Epistle to the Romans; and he read it slowly and elaborately, but without any word of comment or expounding. Then he said that they would sing to the praise of the Lord the XCIII. Psalm—himself leading off with the fine old tune of *Martyrdom;* and this the young people sang very well indeed, though they were a little interfered with by the uncertain treble of the married women and the bovine baritone of the elder. Thereafter the minister offered up a prayer, in which very pointed reference was made to the brother and sister who had come from the far mountains to dwell within the gates of the city; and then all of them

rose, and the maidservants withdrew, and those remaining who had to go began to get ready for their departure.

"Come over and see us soon again," the minister said to him, as they followed him into the lobby; but the minister's wife did not repeat that friendly invitation.

"Ronald," the little Maggie whispered—and her lips were rather tremulous, "if you hear from Meenie, will you let me know?"

"But I am not likely to hear from her, lass," said he, with his hand upon her shoulder. "You must write to her yourself, and she will answer, and send ye the news."

"Mind ye pass the public-houses on the way gaun hame," said the elder, by way of finishing up the evening with a joke: Ronald took no notice, but bade the others good-bye, and opened the door and went out.

When he got into the street his first startled impression was that the world was on fire—all the heavens, but especially the southern heavens, were one blaze of soft and smoky blood-red, into which the roofs and chimney-stacks of the dusky buildings rose solemn and dark. A pulsating crimson it was, now dying away slightly, again gleaming up with a sudden fervour; and always it looked the more strange and bewildering because of the heavy gloom of the buildings and the ineffectual lemon-yellow points of the gas-lamps. Of course he remembered instantly what this must be—the glow of the ironworks over there in the south; and presently he had turned his back on that sullen radiance, and was making away for the north side of the city.

But when he emerged from the comparative quiet of the southern thoroughfares into the glare and roar of Jamaica Street and Argyll Street, all around him there seemed even more of bewilderment than in the daytime. The unceasing din of tramway-cars and vans and carts still filled the air; but now there was everywhere a fierce yellow blaze of gas-light—glowing in the great stocked windows, streaming out across the crowded pavements, and shining on the huge gilded letters and sprawling advertisements of the shops. Then the people—a continuous surge, as of a river; the men begrimed for the most part, here and there two or three drunk and bawling, the women with cleaner faces, but most of them bareheaded, with Highland shawls wrapped

round their shoulders. The suffused crimson glow of the skies was scarcely visible now; this horizontal blaze of gas-light killed it; and through the yellow glare passed the dusky phantasmagoria of a city's life—the cars and horses, the grimy crowds. Buchanan Street, it is true, was less noisy; and he walked quickly, glad to get out of that terrible din; and by and by, when he got away up to Port Dundas Road, where his lodging was, he found the world grown quite quiet again, and gloomy and dark, save for the solitary gas-lamps and the faint dull crimson glow sent across from the southern skies.

He went up the stone stair, was admitted to the house, and shown into the apartment that his brother had secured for him. It had formerly been used as a sitting-room, with a bedroom attached; but now these were separated, and a bed was placed at one end of the little parlour, which was plainly and not untidily furnished. When his landlady left he proceeded to unpack his things, getting out first his books, which he placed on the mantel-shelf to be ready for use in the morning; then he made some further disposition of his belongings; and then—then somehow he fell away from this industrious mood, and became more and more absent, and at last went idly to the window, and stood looking out there. There was not much to be seen—a few lights about the Caledonian Railway Station, some dusky sheds, and that faint red glow in the sky.

But—Inver-Mudal? Well, if only he had reflected, Inver-Mudal must at this moment have been just about as dark as was this railway station and the neighbourhood surrounding it—unless, indeed, it happened to be a clear starlit night away up there in the north, with the heavens shining beautiful and benignant over Clebrig, and the loch, and the little hamlet among the trees. However, that was not the Inver-Mudal he was thinking of; it was the Inver-Mudal of a clear spring day, with sweet winds blowing across the moors, and the sunlight yellow on Clebrig's slopes, and Loch Naver's waters all a rippling and dazzling blue. And Mr. Murray standing at the door of the inn, and smoking his pipe, and joking with any one that passed; the saucy Nelly casting glances among the lads; Harry with dark suspicions of rats wherever he could find a hole in the wall of the

barn; Maggie, under instruction of Duncan the ploughman, driving the two horses hauling a harrow over the rough red land; everywhere the birds singing; the young corn showing green; and then—just as the chance might be—Meenie coming along the road, her golden-brown hair blown by the wind, her eyes about as blue as Loch Naver's shining waters, and herself calling, with laughter and scolding, to Maggie to desist from that tomboy work. And where was it all gone now? He seemed to have shut his eyes upon that beautiful clear, joyous world; and to have plunged into a hideous and ghastly dream. The roar and yellow glare—the black houses—the lurid crimson in the sky—the terrible loneliness and silence of this very room—well, he could not quite understand it yet. But perhaps it would not always seem so bewildering; perhaps one might grow accustomed in time?—and teach one's self to forget? And then again he had resolved that he would not read over any more the verses he had written in the olden days about Meenie, and the hills and the streams and the straths that knew her and loved her—for these idle rhymes made him dream dreams; that is to say, he had almost resolved—he had very nearly resolved—that he would not read over any more the verses he had written about Meenie.

CHAPTER XXVI.

GRAY DAYS.

But, after all, that first plunge into city-life had had something of the excitement of novelty; it was the settling down thereafter to the dull monotonous round of labour, in this lonely lodging, with the melancholy gray world of mist surrounding him and shutting him in, that was to test the strength of his resolve. The first day was not so bad; for now and again he would relieve the slow tedium of the hours by doing a little carpentering about the room; and the sharp sound of hammer and nail served to break in upon that hushed, slumberous murmur of the great city without that seemed a mournful, distant, oppressive thing. But the next day of this solitary life (for it was not until the end of the week he was to see Mr. Weems) was dread-

ful. The dull, silent gray hours would not go by. Wrestling with Ewart's *Agricultural Assistant*, or Balfour's *Elements of Botany*, or with distressing problems in land-surveying or timber-measuring, he would think the time had passed; and then, going to the window for a moment's relief to eye and brain, he would see by the clock of the railway station that barely half an hour had elapsed since last he had looked at the obdurate hands. How he envied the porters, the cab-drivers, the men who were loading and unloading the waggons; they seemed all so busy and contented; they were getting through with their work; they had something to show for their labour; they had companions to talk to and joke with; sometimes he thought he could hear them laughing. And ah, how much more he envied the traveller who drove up and got leisurely out of the cab, and had his luggage carried into the station, himself following and disappearing from view! Whither was he going, then, away from this great, melancholy city, with its slow hours, and wan skies, and dull, continuous, stupefying murmur? Whither, indeed!—away by the silver links of Forth, perhaps, with the castled rock of Stirling rising into the windy blue and white; away by the wooded banks of Allan Water and the bonnie Braes of Doune; by Strathyre, and Glenogle, and Glenorchy; and past the towering peaks of Ben Cruachan, and out to the far-glancing waters of the western seas. Indeed it is a sore pity that Miss Carry Hodson, in a fit of temper, had crushed together and thrust into the bottom of the boat the newspaper containing an estimate of Ronald's little Highland poem; if only she had handed it on to him, he would have learned that the sentiment of nostalgia is too slender and fallacious a thing for any sensible person to bother his head about; and, instead of wasting his time in gazing at the front of a railway station, he would have gone resolutely back to Strachan's *Agricultural Tables* and the measuring and mapping of surface areas.

On the third day he grew desperate.

"In God's name let us see if there's not a bit of blue sky anywhere!" he said to himself; and he flung his books aside, and put on his Glengarry cap, and took a stick in his hand, and went out.

Alas! that there were no light pattering steps following him down the stone stair; the faithful Harry had had to be left behind, under charge of Mr. Murray of the inn. And indeed Ronald found it so strange to be going out without some companion of the kind that when he passed into the wide, dull thoroughfare, he looked up and down everywhere to see if he could not find some homeless wandering cur that he could induce to go with him. But there was no sign of dog-life visible; for the matter of that there was little sign of any other kind of life; there was nothing before him but the wide, empty, dull-hued street, apparently terminating in a great wilderness of india-rubber works and oil-works and the like, all of them busily engaged in pouring volumes of smoke through tall chimneys into the already sufficiently murky sky.

But when he got farther north, he found that there were lanes and alleys permeating this mass of public works; and eventually he reached a canal, and crossed that, deeming that if he kept straight on he must reach the open country somewhere. As yet he could make out no distance; blocks of melancholy soot-begrimed houses, timber-yards, and blank stone walls shut in the view on every hand; moreover there was a brisk north wind blowing that was sharply pungent with chemical fumes and also gritty with dust; so that he pushed on quickly, anxious to get some clean air into his lungs, and anxious, if that were possible, to get a glimpse of green fields and blue skies. For, of course, he could not always be at his books; and this, as he judged, must be the nearest way out into the country; and he could not do better than gain some knowledge of his surroundings, and perchance discover some more or less secluded sylvan retreat, where, in idle time, he might pess an hour or so with his pencil and his verses and his memories of the moors and hills.

But the farther out he got the more desolate and desolating became the scene around him. Here was neither town nor country; or rather, both were there; and both were dead. He came upon a bit of hawthorn-edge; the stems were coal-black, the leaves begrimed out of all semblance to natural foliage. There were long straight roads, sometimes fronted by a stone wall and sometimes

by a block of buildings—dwelling-houses, apparently, but of the most squalid and dingy description; the windows opaque with dirt; the "closes" foul; the pavements in front unspeakable. But the most curious thing was the lifeless aspect of this dreary neighbourhood. Where were the people? Here or there two or three ragged children would be playing in the gutter; or perhaps, in a dismal little shop an old woman might be seen, with some half-withered apples and potatoes on the counter. But where were the people who at one time or other must have inhabited these great, gaunt, gloomy tenements; He came to a dreadful place called Saracen Cross—a very picture of desolation and misery; the tall blue-black buildings showing hardly any sign of life in their upper flats; the shops below being for the most part tenantless, the windows rudely boarded over. It seemed as if some blight had fallen over the land, first obliterating the fields, and then laying its withering hand on the houses that had been built on them. And yet these melancholy-looking buildings were not wholly uninhabited; here or there a face was visible—but always of women or children; and perhaps the men-folk were away at work somewhere in a factory. Anyhow, under this dull gray sky, with a dull gray mist in the air, and with a strange silence everywhere around, the place seemed a City of the Dead; he could not understand how human beings could live in it at all.

At last, however, he came to some open spaces that still bore some half-decipherable marks of the country, and his spirits rose a little. He even tried to sing "O say, will you marry me, Nelly Munro?"—to force himself into a kind of liveliness, as it were, and to prove to himself that things were not quite so bad after all. But the words stuck in his throat. His voice sounded strangely in this silent and sickly solitude. And at last he stood stock still, to have a look round about him, and to make out what kind of a place this was that he had entered into.

Well, it was a very strange kind of place. It seemed to have been forgotten by somebody, when all the other land near was being ploughed through by railway-lines and heaped up into embankments. Undoubtedly there were traces of the country still remaining—and even of agricul-

ture; here and there a line of trees, stunted and nipped by the poisonous air; a straggling hedge or two, withered and black; a patch of corn, of a pallid and hopeless colour; and a meadow with cattle feeding in it. But the road that led through these bucolic solitudes was quite new and made of cinders; in the distance it seemed to lose itself in a network of railway embankments; while the background of this strange simulacrum of a landscape—so far as that could be seen through the pall of mist and smoke—seemed to consist of further houses, ironworks, and tall chimney-stacks. Anything more depressing and disconsolate he had never witnessed; nay, he had had no idea that any such God-forsaken neighbourhood existed anywhere in the world; and he thought he would much rather be back at his books than wandering through this dead and spectral land. Moreover it was beginning to rain—a thin, pertinacious drizzle that seemed to hang in the thick and clammy air; and so he struck away to the right, in the direction of some houses, guessing that there he would find some way of getting back to the city other than that ghastly one he had come by.

By the time he had reached these houses—a suburb or village this seemed to be that led in a straggling fashion up to the crest of a small hill—it was raining heavily. Now ordinarily a gamekeeper in the Highlands is not only indifferent to rain, but apparently incapable of perceiving the existence of it. When was wet weather at Inver-Mudal ever known to interfere with the pursuits or occupations of anybody? Why, the lads there would as soon have thought of taking shelter from the rain as a terrier would. But it is one thing to be walking over wet heather in knicker-bocker-stockings and shoes, the water quite clean, and the exercise keeping legs and feet warm enough, and it is entirely another thing to be walking through mud made of black cinders, with clammy trousers flapping coldly round one's ankles. Nay, so miserable was all this business that he took refuge in an entry leading into one of those "lands" of houses; and there he stood, in the cold stone passage, with a chill wind blowing through it, looking out on the swimming pavements, and the black and muddy road, and the dull stone walls, and the mournful skies.

At length, the rain moderating somewhat, he issued out

from his shelter, and set forth for the town. A tramway-car passed him, but he had no mind to be jammed in amongst a lot of elderly women, all damp and with dripping umbrellas. Nay, he was trying to convince himself that the very discomfort of this dreary march homeward—through mud and drizzle and fog—was a wholesome thing. After that glimpse of the kind of country that lay outside the town—in this direction at least—there would be less temptation for him to throw down his books and go off for idle strolls. He assured himself that he ought to be glad that he found no verdant meadows and purling brooks; that, on the contrary, the aspect of this suburban territory was sufficiently appalling to drive him back to his lodgings. All the same, when he did arrive there, he was somewhat disheartened and depressed; and he went up the stone staircase slowly; and when he entered that solitary, dull little room, and sate down, he felt limp and damp and tired—tired, after a few miles' walk! And then he took to his books again, with his mouth set hard.

Late that night he was sitting as usual alone, and rather absently turning over his papers; and already it had come to this that now, when he chanced to read any of these writings of his of former days, they seemed to have been written by some one else. Who was this man, then, that seemed to go through the world with a laugh and a song, as it were; rating this one, praising that; having it all his own way; and with never a thought of the morrow? But there was one piece in particular that struck home. It was a description of the little terrier; he had pencilled it on the back of an envelope one warm summer day when he was lying at full length on the heather, with Harry not half a dozen yards off, his nose between his paws. Harry did not know that his picture was being taken.

Auld, gray, and grizzled; yellow een;
A nose as brown's a berry;
A wit as sharp as ony preen—
That's my wee chieftain Harry.

Lord sakes!—the courage of the man!
The biggest barn-yard ratten,
He'll snip him by the neck, o'er-han',
As he the deil had gatten.

And when his master's work on hand,
There's none maun come anear him;
The biggest Duke in all Scotland,
My Harry's teeth would fear him.

But ordinar' wise like fowl or freen,
He's harmless as a kitten;
As soon he'd think o' worryin'
A hennie when she's sittin'

But Harry, lad, ye're growin' auld;
Your days are gettin fewer;
And maybe Heaven has made a fauld
For such wee things as you are.

And what strange kintra will that be?
And will they fill your coggies?
And whatna strange folk there will see
There's water for the doggies?

Ae thing I brawly ken; it's this—
Ye may hae work or play there;
But if your master once ye miss,
I'm bound ye winna stay there.

It was the last verse that struck home. It was through no failure of devotion on the part of the faithful Harry that he was now at Inver-Mudal; it was his Master that had played him false, and severed the old companionship. And he kept thinking about the little terrier; and wondering whether he missed his master as much as his master missed him; and wondering whether Meenie had ever a word for him as she went by—for she and Harry had always been great friends. Nay, perhaps Meenie might not take it ill if Maggie wrote to her for news of the little dog; and then Meenie would answer; and might not her letter take a wider scope, and say something about the people there, and about herself? Surely she would do that; and some fine morning the answer—in Meenie's handwriting—would be delivered in Abbotsford Place; and he knew that Maggie would not be long in apprising him of the same. Perhaps, indeed, he might himself become possessed of that precious missive; and bring it away with him; and from time to time have a glance at this or that sentence of it—in Meenie's own actual handwriting—when the long dull work of the day was over, and his fancy free to fly away to the

north again, to Strath-Terry and Clebrig and Loch-Naver, and the neat small cottage with the red blinds in the windows. It seemed to him a long time now since he had left all of these; he felt as though Glasgow had engulfed him: while the day of his rescue—the day of the fulfilment of his ambitious designs—was now growing more and more distant and vague and uncertain, leaving him only the slow drudgery of these weary hours. But Meenie's letter would be a kind of talisman; to see her handwriting would be like hearing her speak; and surely this dull little lodging was quiet enough, so that in the hushed silence of the evening, he, reading those cheerful phrases, might persuade himself that it was Meenie's voice he was listening to, with the quiet, clear, soft laugh that so well he remembered.

And so these first days went by; and he hoped in time to get more accustomed to this melancholy life; and doggedly he stuck to the task he had set before him. As for the outcome of it all—well, that did not seem quite so facile nor so fine a thing as it had appeared before he came away from the north; but he left that for the future to decide; and in the meantime he was above all anxious not to perplex himself by the dreaming of idle dreams. He had come to Glasgow to work; not to build impossible castles in the air.

CHAPTER XXVII.

KATE.

And yet it was a desperately hard ordeal; for this man was by nature essentially joyous, and sociable; and fitted to be the king of all good company; and the whole of his life had been spent in the open, in brisk and active exercise: and sunlight and fresh air were to him as the very breath of his nostrils. But here he was, day after day, week after week, chained to these dismal tasks; in solitude: with the far white dream of ambition becoming more and more distant and obscured; and with a terrible consciousness ever growing upon him that in coming away from even the mere neighbourhood of Meenie, from the briefest companionship with her, he had sacrificed the one beautiful

thing, the one precious possession, that his life had ever held for him or would hold. What though the impalpable barrier of Glengask and Orosay rose between him and her? He was no sentimental Claude Melnotte; he had common sense; he accepted facts. Of course Meenie would go away in due time. Of course she was destined for higher things. But what then? What of the meanwhile? Could anything happen to him quite so wonderful, or worth the striving for, as Meenie's smile to him as she met him in the road? What for the time being made the skies full of brightness, and made the pulses of the blood flow gladly, and the day become charged with a kind of buoyancy of life? And as for these vague ambitions for the sake of which he had bartered away his freedom and sold himself into slavery—towards what did they tend? For whom? The excited atmosphere the Americans had brought with them had departed now: alas! this other atmosphere into which he had plunged was dull and sad enough, in all conscience; and the leaden days weighed down upon him; and the slow and solitary hours would not go by.

One evening he was coming in to the town by way of the Pollokshaws road; he had spent the afternoon hard at work with Mr. Weems, and was making home again to the silent little lodging in the north. He had now been a month and more in Glasgow; and had formed no kind of society or companionship whatever. Once or twice he had looked in at his brother's; but that was chiefly to see how the little Maggie was going on; his sister-in-law gave him no over-friendly welcome; and, indeed, the social atmosphere of the Reverend Andrew's house was far from being congenial to him. As for the letter of introduction that Meenie had given him to her married sister, of course he had not had the presumption to deliver that; he had accepted the letter, and thanked Meenie for it—for it was but another act of her always thoughtful kindness; but Mrs. Gemmill was the wife of a partner in a large warehouse; and they lived in Queen's Crescent; and altogether Ronald had no thought of calling on them—although to be sure he had heard that Mrs. Gemmill had been making sufficiently minute and even curious inquiries with regard to him of a member of his brother's congregation whom

she happened to know. No; he lived his life alone; wrestling with the weariness of it as best he might; and not quite knowing, perhaps, how deeply it was eating into his heart.

Well, he was walking absently home on this dull gray evening, watching the lamp-lighter adding point after point to the long string of golden stars, when there went by a smartly appointed dog-cart. He did not particularly remark the occupants of the vehicle, though he knew they were two women, and that one of them was driving; his glance fell rather on the well-groomed cob, and he thought the varnished oak dog-cart looked neat and business-like. The next second it was pulled up; there was a pause, during which time he was of course drawing nearer; and then a woman's voice called to him—

"Bless me, is that you, Ronald?"

He looked up in amazement. And who was this, then, who had turned her head round and was now regarding him with her laughing, handsome, bold black eyes? She was a woman apparently of five-and-thirty or so, but exceedingly well preserved and comely; of pleasant features and fresh complexion; and of rather a manly build and carriage—an appearance that was not lessened by her wearing a narrow-brimmed little billycock hat. And then, even in this gathering dusk, he recognised her; and unconsciously he repeated her own words—

"Bless me, is that you, Mrs.—Mrs.—Menzies—" for in truth he had almost forgotten her name.

"Mrs. This or Mrs. That!" the other cried. "I thought my name was Kate—it used to be anyway. Well, I declare! Come, give us a shake of your hand—auntie, this is my cousin Ronald!—and who would hae thought of meeting you in Glasgow, now!"

"I have been here a month and more," Ronald said, taking the proffered hand.

"And never to look near me once—there's friendliness! Eh, and what a man you've grown to—ye were just a bit laddie when I saw ye last—but aye after the lasses, though—oh aye—bless me, what changes there hae been since then!"

"Well, Katie, it's not you that have changed much any-

way," said he, for he was making out again the old familiar girlish expression in the firmer features of the mature woman.

"And what's brought ye to Glasgow?" said she—but then she corrected herself: "No, no; I'll have no long story wi' you standing on the pavement like that. Jump up behind, Ronald, lad, and come home wi' us, and we'll have a crack thegither——"

"Katie, dear," said her companion, who was a little, white-face, cringing and fawning old woman, "let me get down and get up behind. Your cousin must sit beside ye——"

But already Ronald had swung himself on to the after-seat of the vehicle; and Mrs. Menzies had touched the cob with her whip; and soon they were rattling away into the town.

"I suppose ye heard that my man was dead?" said she presently, and partly turning round.

"I think I did," he answered rather vaguely.

"He was a good man to me, like Auld Robin Gray," said this strapping widow, who certainly had a very matter-of-fact way in talking about her deceased husband. "But he was never the best of managers, poor man. I've been doing better ever since. We've a better business, and not a penny of mortgage left on the tavern."

"Weel ye may say that, Katie," whined the old woman. "There never was such a manager as you—never. Ay, and the splendid furniture—it was never thought o' in his time—bless 'm! A good man he was, and a kind man; but no the manager you are, Katie; there's no such another tavern in a' Glesca."

Now although the cousinship with Ronald claimed by Mrs. Menzies did not exist in actual fact,—there was some kind of remote relationship, however,—still, it must be confessed that it was very ungrateful and inconstant of him to have let the fate and fortunes of the pretty Kate Burnside (as she was in former days) so entirely vanish from his mind and memory. Kate Burnside was the daughter of a small farmer in the Lammermuir district; and the Strangs and Burnsides were neighbours as well as remotely related by blood. But that was not the only reason why Ronald

ought to have remembered a little more about the stalwart, black-eyed, fresh-cheeked country wench who, though she was some seven or eight years or more his senior, he had badly chosen for his sweetheart in his juvenile days. Nay, had she not been the first inspirer of his muse; and had he not sung this ox-eyed goddess in many a laboured verse, carefully constructed after the manner of Tannahill or Motherwell or Allan Cunningham? The "lass of Lammer Law" he called her in these artless strains; and Kate was far from resenting this frank devotion; nay, she even treasured up the verses in which her radiant beauties were enumerated; for why should not a comely East Lothian wench take pleasure in being told that her cheeks outshone the rose, and that the "darts o' her bonnie black een" had slain their thousands, and that her faithful lover would come to see her, ay, though the Himalayas barred his way! But then, alas!—as happens in the world—the faithful lover was sent off into far neighbourhoods to learn the art and mystery of training pointers and setters; and Kate's father died, and the family dispersed from the farm; Kate went into service in Glasgow, and there she managed to capture the affections of an obese and elderly publican whom—she being a prudent and sensible kind of a creature—she forthwith married; by and by, through partaking too freely of his own wares, he considerately died, leaving her in sole possession of the tavern (he had called it a public-house, but she soon changed all that, and the place too, when she was established as its mistress); and now she was a handsome, buxom, firm-nerved woman, who could and did look well after her own affairs; who had a flourishing business, a comfortable bank account, and a sufficiency of friends of her own way of thinking; and whose raven-black hair did not as yet show a single streak of gray. It was all this latter part of Kate Burnside's—or rather, Mrs. Menzies's—career of which Ronald was so shamefully ignorant; but she speedily gave him enough information about herself as they drove through the gas-lit streets, for she was a voluble, high-spirited woman, who could make herself heard when she chose.

"Ay," said she, at length, "and where have ye left the goodwife, Ronald?"

"What goodwife?" said he.

"Ye dinna tell me that you're no married yet?"

"Not that I know of," said he.

"What have ye been about, man? Ye were aye daft about the lasses; and ye no married yet? What have ye been about man, to let them a' escape ye?"

"Some folk have other things to think of," said he evasively.

"Dinna tell me," she retorted. "I ken weel what's uppermost in the mind o' a handsome lad like you. Weel, if ye're no married, ye're the next door to it, I'll be bound. What's she like?"

"I'll tell ye when I find her," said he drily.

"Ye're a dark one; but I'll find ye out, my man."

She could not continue the conversation, for they were about to cross the bridge over the Clyde, and the congested traffic made her careful. And then again Jamaica Street was crowded and difficult to steer through; but presently she left that for a quieter thoroughfare leading off to the right; and in a few moments she had pulled up in front of a large tavern, close by a spacious archway.

"Auntie, gang you and fetch Alec to take the cob round, will ye?" said she; and then Ronald, surmising that she had now reached home, leapt to the ground, and went to the horse's head. Presently the groom appeared, and Kate Menzies descended from her chariot.

Now in Glasgow, for an establishment of this kind to be popular, it must have a side entrance—the more the merrier, indeed—by which people can get into the tavern without being seen; but besides this it soon appeared that Mrs. Menzies had a private right of way of her own. She bade Ronald follow her; she went through the archway; produced a key and opened a door; and then, passing along a short lobby, he found himself in what might be regarded as the back parlour of the public-house, but was in reality a private room reserved by Mrs. Menzies for herself and her intimate friends. And a very brilliant little apartment it was; handsomely furnished and shining with stained wood, plate glass, and velvet; the gas-jets all aglow in the clear globes; the table in the middle laid with a white cloth for supper, all sparkling with crystal and

polished electro-plate. Moreover (for business is business) this luxurious little den commanded at will complete views of the front premises; and there was also a door leading thither; but the door was shut, and the red blinds were drawn over the two windows, so that the room looked quite like one in a private dwelling.

"And now, my good woman," said Mrs. Menzies, as she threw her hat and cloak and dog-skin gloves into a corner, "just you mak' them hurry up wi' supper; for we're just home in time; and we'll want another place at the table. And tell Jeannie there's a great friend o' mine come in, if she can get anything special—Lord's sake, Ronald, if I had kent I was going to fall in with you I would have looked after it mysel'."

"Ye need not bother about me," said he, "for supper is not much in my way—not since I came to the town. Without the country air, I think one would as lief not sit down to a table at all."

"Oh, I can cure ye o' that complaint," she said confidently; and she rang the bell.

Instantly the door was opened, and he caught a glimpse of a vast palatial-looking place, with more stained wood and plate glass and velvet, and with several smartly-dressed young ladies standing or moving behind the long mahogany counters; moreover, one of these—a tall and serious-eyed maiden—now stood at the partly opened door.

"Gin and bitters, Mary," said Mrs. Menzies briskly—she was at this moment standing in front of one of the mirrors, complacently smoothing her hair with her hands, and setting to rights her mannish little necktie.

The serious-eyed handmaiden presently reappeared, bringing a small salver, on which was a glass filled with some kind of a fluid, which she presented to him.

"What's this?" said he, appealing to his hostess.

"Drink it and find out," said she; "it'll make ye jump wi' hunger, as the Hielanman said."

He did as he was bid; and loudly she laughed at the wry face that he made.

"What's the matter?"

"It's a devil of a kind of thing, that," said he; for it was a first experience.

"Ay, but wait till ye find how hungry it will make ye," she answered; and then she returned from the mirror. "And I'm sure ye'll no mind my hair being a wee thing camstrairy, Ronald; there's no need for ceremony between auld freens, as the saying is——"

"But, look here, Katie, my lass," said he—for perhaps he was a little emboldened by that fiery fluid, "I'm thinking that maybe I'm making myself just a little too much at home. Now, some other time, when ye've no company, I'll come in and see ye——"

But she cut him short at once, and with some pride.

"Indeed, I'll tell ye this, that the day that Ronald Strang comes into my house—and into my own house too—that's no the day that he's gaun out o't without eating and drinking. Ma certes, no! And as for company, why there's none but auld mother Paterson—I ca' her auntie; but she's no more my auntie than you are—ye see, my man, Ronald, a poor unprotected helpless widow woman maun look after appearances—for the world's unco given to leein', as Shakespeare says. There, Ronald, that's another thing," she added suddenly—"ye'll take me to the theatre!—my word, we'll have a box!"

But these gay visions were interrupted by the reappearance of Mrs. Paterson, who was followed by a maidservant bearing a dish on which was a large sole, smoking hot. Indeed, it soon became apparent that this was to be a very elaborate banquet, such as Ronald was not at all familiar with; and all the care and flattering attention his hostess could pay him she paid him, laughing and joking with him, and insisting on his having the very best of everything, and eager to hand things to him—even if she rather ostentatiously displayed her abundant rings in doing so. And when mother Paterson said—

"What will ye drink, Katie dear? Some ale—or some porter?"

The other stormily answered—

"Get out, ye daft auld wife! Ale or porter the first day that my cousin Ronald comes into my own house? Champagne's the word, woman; and the best! What will ye have, Ronald—what brand do ye like?—Moett and Shandon?"

Ronald laughed.

"What do I know about such things?" said he. "And besides, there's no reason for such extravagance. There's been no stag killed the day."

"There's been no stag killed the day," she retorted, "but Ronald Strang's come into my house, and he'll have the best that's in it, or my name's no Kate Burnside—or Kate Menzies, I should say, God forgie me! Ring the bell, auntie."

This time the grave-eyed barmaid appeared.

"A bottle of Moett and Shandon, Mary."

"A pint bottle, m'm?"

"A pint bottle—ye stupid idiot?" she said (but quite good-naturedly). "A quart bottle, of course!"

And then when the bottle was brought and the glasses filled, she said—

"Here's your health, Ronald; and right glad am I to see you looking so weel—ye were aye a bonnie laddie, and ye've kept the promise o't—ay, indeed, the whole o' you Strangs were a handsome family—except your brother Andrew, maybe——"

"Do ye ever see Andrew?" Ronald said; for a modest man does not like to have his looks discussed, even in the most flattering way.

Then loudly laughed Kate Menzies.

"Me? Me gang and see the Reverend Andrew Strang? No fears! He's no one o' my kind. He'd drive me out o' the house wi' bell, book, and candle. I hae my ain friends, thank ye—and I'm going to number you amongst them so long as ye stop in this town. Auntie, pass the bottle to Ronald!"

And so the banquet proceeded—a roast fowl and bacon, an apple-tart, cheese and biscuits and what not following in due succession; and all the time she was learning more and more of the life that Ronald had led since he had left the Lothians, and freely she gave him of her confidences in return. On one point she was curiously inquisitive, and that was as to whether he had not been in some entanglement with one or other of the Highland lasses up there in Sutherlandshire; and there was a considerable amount of joking on that subject, which Ronald bore good-naturedly

enough; finding it on the whole the easier way to let her surmises have free course.

"But ye're a dark one!" she said at length. "And ye would hae me believe that a strapping fellow like you hasna had the lasses rinnin' after him? I'm no sae daft."

"I'll tell ye what it is, Katie," he retorted, "the lasses in the Highlands have their work to look after; they dinna live a' in clover, like the Glasgow dames."

"Dinna tell me—dinna tell me," she said.

And now, as supper was over and the table cleared, she went to a small mahogany cabinet and opened it.

"I keep some cigars here for my particular friends," said Mrs. Menzies, "but I'm sure I dinna ken which is the best. Come and pick for yourself, Ronald lad; if you're no certain the best plan is to take the biggest."

"This is surely living on the fat of the land, Katie," he protested.

"And what for no?" said she boldly. "Let them enjoy themselves that's earned the right to it."

"But that's not me," he said.

"Well, it's me," she answered. "And when my cousin Ronald comes into my house, it's the best that's in it that's at his service—and no great wonder either!"

Well, her hospitality was certainly a little stormy; but the handsome widow meant kindly and well; and it is scarcely to be marvelled at if—under the soothing influences of the fragrant tobacco—he was rather inclined to substitute for this brisk and business-like Kate Menzies of these present days the gentler figure of the Kate Burnside of earlier years, more especially as she had taken to talking of those times, and of all the escapades the young lads and lasses used to enjoy on Hallowe'en night or during the first-footing at Hogmanay.

"And now I mind me, Ronald," she said, "ye used to be a fine singer when ye were a lad. Do ye keep it up still?"

"I sometimes try," he answered. "But there's no been much occasion since I came to this town. It's a lonely kind o' place, for a' the number o' folk in it."

"Well, now ye're among friends, give us something!"

"Oh, that I will, if ye like," said he readily; and he laid aside his cigar.

And then he sang—moderating his voice somewhat, so that he should not be heard in the front premises—a verse or two of an old favourite—

> *"The sun rase sae rosy, the gray hills adorning,*
> *Light sprung the laverock, and mounted sae high,"*

and if his voice was quiet, still the clear penetrating quality of it was there; and when he had finished Kate Menzies said to him—after a second of irresolution—

"Ye couldna sing like that when ye were a lad, Ronald. It's maist like to gar a body greet."

But he would not sing any more that night; he guessed that she must have her business affairs to attend to; and he was resolved upon going, in spite of all her importunacy. However, as a condition, she got him to promise to come and see her on the following evening. It was Saturday night; several of her friends were in the habit of dropping in on that night; finally, she pressed her entreaty so that he could not well refuse; and, having promised, he left.

And no doubt as he went home through the great, noisy, lonely city, he felt warmed and cheered by this measure of human companionship that had befallen him. As for Kate Menzies, it would have been a poor return for her excessive kindness if he had stopped to ask himself whether her robust *camaraderie* did not annoy him a little. He had had plenty of opportunities of becoming acquainted with the manners and speech and ways of refined and educated women; indeed, there are few gamekeepers in the Highlands who have not at one time or another enjoyed that privilege. Noble and gracious ladies who, in the south, would as soon think of talking to a doormat as of entering into any kind of general conversation with their butler or coachman, will fall quite naturally into the habit—when they are living away in the seclusion of a Highland glen with the shooting-party at the lodge—of stopping to have a chat with Duncan or Hector the gamekeeper when they chance to meet him coming along the road with his dogs; and, what is more, they find him worth the talking to. Then, again, had not Ronald been an almost daily spectator of Miss Douglas's sweet and winning manners—and that continued through years; and had not the young American lady, during the briefer period she

was in the north, made quite a companion of him in her frank and brave fashion? He had almost to confess to himself that there was just a little too much of Mrs. Menzies's tempestuous good nature; and then again he refused to confess anything of the kind; and quarrelled with himself for being so ungrateful. Why, the first bit of real, heart-felt friendliness that had been shown him since he came to this great city; and he was to examine it; and be doubtful; and wish that the keeper of a tavern should be a little more refined!

"Ronald lad," he was saying to himself when he reached his lodging in the dusky Port Dundas Road, "it's over-fed stomachs that wax proud. You'll be better-minded if you keep to your books and plainer living."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A SOCIAL EVENING.

LOOKING forward to this further festivity he worked hard at his studies all day, and it was not until nearly nine o'clock in the evening that he went away down through the roaring streets to keep his engagement with Kate Menzies. And very snug and comfortable indeed did the little parlour look, with its clear glass globes and warmly-cushioned seats and brilliant mirrors and polished wood. Kate herself (who was quite resplendent in purple velvet and silver necklace and bangles) was reading a sporting newspaper; old mother Paterson was sewing; there were cigar-boxes on the table.

"And what d'ye mean," cried the handsome widow gaily, when he made his appearance, "by coming at this hour? Did not I tell ye we would expect ye to supper?"

"Would ye have me eat you out o' house and home, woman?" he said. "Besides, I had some work to get through."

"Well, sit down and make yerself happy; better late than never; there's the cigars——"

"I would as lief smoke a pipe, Katie, if ye don't object—only that I'm shamed to smoke in a fine place like this——"

"What is't for, man? Do ye think I got it up for an

exhibition—to be put in a glass case! And what'll ye drink now, Ronald—some Moett and Shandon?"

"Indeed no," said he. "If I may light my pipe I want nothing else."

"But I canna bear an empty table," said she. "Here, auntie, get your flounces and falderals out o' the road—bless us, woman, ye make the place look like a milliner's shop! And bring out the punch-bowl frae the chiffonier—I want ye to see it, Ronald, for it was gien to my gudeman by an auld freend o' his in Ayr, that got it from the last of the lairds o' Garthlie. And if ane or twa o' them happen to come in to-night we'll try a brew—for there's naething so wholesome, after a', as the wine o' the country, and I can gie ye some o' the real stuff. Will ye no try a drop the noo?"

"No thank ye, no thank ye," said he, for he had lit his pipe, and was well content.

"Well, well, we'll have one o' the lasses in to set the tumblers and the glasses, for I canna thole to see a bare table; and in the meantime, Ronald, you and me can hae a crack be oursels, and ye can tell me what ye mean to do when ye get your certificate——"

"If I get it, ye mean, lass."

"No fears," she said confidently; "ye were aye one o' the clever ones; I'll warrant ye there's na skim-milk in your head where the brains should be. But I want to ken what ye're ettling at after you've got the certificate, and what's your plans, and the like; for I've been thinking about it; and if there was any kind o' a starting needed—the loan of a bit something in the way of a nest egg, ye see—weel, I ken a place where ye might get that, and ye wouldna have to whistle long at the yett either."

Now there was no mistaking the generosity of this offer, however darkly it might be veiled by Kate Menzie's figurative manner of speech; and it was with none the less gratitude that he answered her and explained that a head-forester traded with the capital of his employer, though, to be sure, he might on entering a new situation have to find sureties for him.

"Is it caution-money ye mean, Ronald?" she said frankly.

"Well, if a man had no one to speak for him—no one

whose word they would take," he said to her (though all this was guess-work on his part), "they might ask him for security. There would be no payment of money, of course, unless he robbed his employer; and then the sureties would have to make that good as far as they had undertaken. But it's a long way off yet, Katie, and hardly worth speaking about. I daresay Lord Ailine would say a word for me."

"And is that a'?" she said, with a laugh. "Is that a' the money's wanted for—to guarantee the honesty o' one o' the Strangs o' Whittermains? Weel, I'm no a rich woman, Ronald—for my money's maistly sunk in the tavern—and doing weel enough there too—but if it's a surety ye want, for three hunder pounds, ay, or five hunder pounds, just you come to me, and the deil's in't if we canna manage it somehow."

"I thank ye for the offer anyway; I'm sure you mean it," said he.

"That lawyer o' mine," she continued, "is a dour chiel; he'll no let me do this; and he's grumbling at that; and a poor widow woman is supposed to hae nae soul o' her ain. I'm sure the fuss that he makes about that cob, and only fifty-five guineas, and come o' the best Clydesdale stock——"

"But it was no the expense, it was no the expense, Katie dear," whined the old woman, "it was the risk to your life frae sae high-mettled a beast. Just think o't, at your time o' life, wi' a grand business, and yoursel' the manager o' it, and wi' sae mony freends, think what it would be if ye broke your neck——"

"Broke your grandmother's fiddlestrings!" said she. "The beast's as quiet's a lamb. But that auld man, Peter Gunn. I suppose he's a good lawyer—indeed, every one says that—but he's as pernickety as an auld woman; and he'd mak' ye think the world was made o' silk paper, and ye daurna stir a step for fear o' fa'in through. But you just give me the word, Ronald, when the security's wanted; and we'll see if auld Peter can hinder me frae doing what I ought to do for one o' my own kith and kin."

They were thus talking when there came a knock at the outer door: then there was a clamour of voices in the little lobby; and presently there were ushered into the room three visitors, who were forthwith introduced to Ronald,

with a few words of facetious playfulness from the widow. There was first a Mr. Jaap, a little old man with Jewish features, bald on the top of his head, but with long, flowing gray hair behind; a mild-looking old man, but with merry eyes nevertheless—and indeed all of them seemed to have been joking as they came in. Then there was a Mr. Laidlaw, a younger man, of middle height, and of a horsey type; stupid-looking, rather, but not ill-natured. The third was Captain M'Taggart, a large heavy man, with a vast, radiant, Bardolphian face, whose small, shrewd, twinkling blue eyes had the expression rather of a Clyde skipper given to rough jesting and steady rum-drinking (and he was all that) than of the high-souled, child-hearted sailor of romance.

"Sit ye down, sit ye down," their hostess said gaily. "Here, captain, is a job for ye: here's the punch-bowl that we only have on great days, ye ken; and your brew is famous—whether wi' old Jamaica or Long John. Set to work now—here's the sugar and the lemons ready for ye—for ye maun a' drink the health o' my cousin here that's come frae Sutherland."

"Frae Sutherland, say ye, Mistress?" the big skipper said, as he reached over for the lemons. "Ye should ca' him your kissin frae the Hielands then. Do ye ken that story, Laidlaw? D'ye ken that yin about the Hieland kissins, Jaap? Man, that's a gude yin! have ye no heard it? Have ye no heard it, Mistress?"

"Tell us what it is first, and we'll tell you afterwards," said she saucily.

"Weel, then," said he—and he desisted from his preparations for the punch-making, for he was famous along the Broomielaw as a story-teller, and liked to keep up his reputation, "it was twa young lasses, twa cousins they were, frae the west side o' Skye—and if there's ony place mair Hielan than that, it's no me that ever heard o't—and they were ta'en into service in an inn up about the Gairloch or Loch Inver, or one o' they lochs. Both o' them were good-looking lasses, mind ye; but one o' them just unusual handsome. Well, then, there happened to come to the inn an English tourist—a most respectable old gentleman he was; and it was one o' they two lasses—and no the brawest o' them either—that had to wait on him; but he

wàs a freendly auld man; and on the mornin' o' his gaun awa he had to ring for something or other, and when she brought it to him, he said to her, jist by way o' compliment, ye ken, 'You are a very good-looking girl, do you know, Flora?' And of course the lass was very well pleased; but she was a modest lassie too; and she said, 'Oh no, sir; but I hef heard them say my kissin was peautiful!' 'Your what?' said he. 'My kissin, sir—' 'Get away, you bold hussy! Off with you at once, or I'll ring for your master—you brazen baggage!'—and to this very day, they tell me, the poor lass doesna ken what on earth it was that made the auld man into a madman; for what harm had she done in telling him that her cousin was better-looking than herself?"

This recondite joke was received with much laughter by the company; and even Ronald had to admit that the Clyde skipper's imitation of the Highland accent was very fairly well done. But joke-making is dull work with empty glasses; and so Captain M'Taggart set himself seriously to the business of brewing that bowl of punch, while Kate Menzies polished the silver ladle to an even higher extreme of brilliancy.

Now these three old cronies of the widow's had betrayed a little surprise on finding a stranger installed in their favourite howf; and perhaps they might have been inclined to resent the intrusion had not Kate Menzies very speedily intimated her views upon the subject in unmistakable language. Her "cousin Ronald" was all her cry; it was Ronald this and Ronald that; and whatever Ronald said, that was enough, and decisive. For, of course, after a glass or so of punch, the newcomers had got to talking politics—or what they took to be politics; and Ronald, when he was invited to express his opinion, proved to be on the unpopular side; nor did he improve his position by talking with open scorn of a great public agitation then going on—indeed, he so far forgot himself as to define stump-oratory as only another form of foot-and-mouth disease. But at least he had one strenuous backer, and neither Mr. Laidlaw nor Mr. Jaap nor the big skipper was anxious to quarrel with a controversialist who had such abundant stores of hospitality at her command. Moreover, Kate Menzies was

in the habit of speaking her mind; was it not better, for the sake of peace and quietness, to yield a little? This cousin of hers from the Highlands could parade some book-learning it is true; and he had plenty of cut-and-dried theories that sounded plausible enough; and his apparent knowledge of the working of American institutions was sufficiently good for an argument—so long as one could not get at the real facts; but they knew, of course, that, with time to get at these facts and to furnish forth replies to his specious reasonings, they could easily prove their own case. In the meantime they would be magnanimous. For the sake of good fellowship—and to oblige a lady—they shifted the subject.

Or rather she did.

"I suppose you'll be going to the Harmony Club to-night?" she said.

"For a while, at least," replied the captain. "Mr. Jaap's new song is to be sung the nicht; and we maun get him an encore for't. Not that it needs *us*; 'Caledonia's hills and dales' will be a' ower Glasgow before a fortnight's out; and it's young Tam Dalswinton that's to sing it. Tam'll do his best, no fear."

"It's little ye think," observed Mrs. Menzies, with a kind of superior air, "that there's somebody not a hundred miles frae here that can sing better than a' your members and a' your professionals put thegither. The Harmony Club! If the Harmony Club heard *him*, they might tak tent and learn a lesson."

"Ay, and wha's he when he's at hame, Mistress?" Captain M'Taggart said.

"He's not fifty miles away frae here anyway," she said. "And if I was to tell ye that he's sitting not three yards away frae ye at this meenit?"

"Katie, woman, are ye daft?" Ronald said, and he laughed, but his forehead grew red all the same.

"No, I'm no," she answered confidently. "I ken what I'm saying as weel as most folk. Oh, I've heard some o' the best o' them—no at the Harmony Club, for they're too high and mighty to let women bodies in—but at the City Hall concerts and in the theatres; and I've got a good enough ear, too; I ken what's what; and I ken if my

cousin Ronald were to stand up at the Saturday Evening Concerts, and sing the song he sung in this very room last night, I tell ye he would take the shine out o' some o' them ! "

"He micht gie us a screed now," Mr. Laidlaw suggested —his somewhat lack-lustre eyes going from his hostess to Ronald.

"Faith, no ! " Ronald said, laughing, "there's been ower great a flourish beforehand. The fact is, Mrs. Menzies here——"

"I thought I telled ye my name was Kate ? " she said sharply.

"Kate, Cat, or Kitten, then, as ye like, woman, what I mean to say is that ower long a grace makes the porridge cold. Some other time—some other time, lass."

"Ay, and look here, Mr. Jaap," continued the widow, who was determined that her cousin's superior qualifications should not be hidden, "ye are aye complaining that ye canna get anything but trash to set your tunes to. Well, here's my cousin ; I dinna ken if he still keeps at the trade, but as a laddie he could just write ye anything ye liked right aff the reel, and as good as Burns, or better. There's your chance now. Everybody says your music's jist splendid— and the choruses taken up in a meenit—but you just ask Ronald there to gie ye something worth while making a song o'."

Now not only did the old man express his curiosity to see some of Ronald's work in this way, and also the gratification it would give him to set one of his songs to music, but Ronald was likewise well pleased with the proposal. His own efforts in adapting tunes to his verses he knew were very amateurish ; and would it not be a new sensation—a little pride commingled with the satisfaction perhaps —to have one of his songs presented with an original air all to itself, and perhaps put to the test of being sung before some more or less skilled audience ? He knew he had dozens to choose from ; some of them patriotic ; others convivial, others humorous in a kind of way : from any of these the musician was welcome to select as he liked. The love songs about Meenie were a class apart.

And now that they had got away from the thrashed-out

straw of politics to more congenial themes, these three curiously assorted boon-companions proved to be extremely pleasant and good-natured fellows; and when, at length, they said it was time for them to be off to the musical club, they cordially invited Ronald to accompany them. He was nothing loth, for he was curious to see the place; and if Mrs. Menzies grumbled a little at being left alone she consoled herself by hinting that her *protégé* could teach them a lesson if he chose to do so.

"When ye've listened for a while to their squalling, Ronald, my man, jist you get up and show them how an East Lothian lad can do the trick."

"What's that, Mistress? I thought ye said your cousin was frae the Hielans," the skipper broke in.

"Frae the Hielans? Frae East Lothian, I tell ye; where I come frae mysel'; and where ye'll find the brawest lads and lasses in the breadth o' Scotland," she added saucily.

"And they dinna stay a' at hame either," remarked the big skipper, with much gallantry, as the visitors prepared to leave.

They went away through the noisy, crowded, glaring streets, and at length entered a spacious dark courtyard, at the head of which was a small and narrow entrance. The skipper led the way; but as they passed up the staircase they became aware of a noise of music overhead; and when they reached the landing, they had to pause there, so as not to interrupt the proceedings within. It was abundantly clear what these were. A man's voice was singing "Green grow the rashes, O" to a smart and lively accompaniment on the piano; while at the end of each verse joined in a sufficiently enthusiastic chorus:

> "*Green grow the rashes, O,*
> *Green grow the rashes, O,*
> *The sweetest hours that e'er I spent,*
> *Were spent among the lasses, O.*"

and that was repeated:

> "*Green grow the rashes, O,*
> *Green grow the rashes, O,*
> *The sweetest hours that e'er I spent,*
> *Were spent among the lasses, O.*"

Then there was silence. The skipper now opened the door; and, as they entered, Ronald found himself near the head of a long and loftily-ceilinged apartment, the atmosphere of which was of a pale blue cast, through the presence of much tobacco smoke. All down this long room were twin rows of small tables, at which little groups of friends or acquaintances sate—repectable looking men they seemed, many of them young fellows, more of them of middle age, and nearly all of them furnished with drinks and pipes or cigars. At the head of the room was a platform, not raised more than a foot from the floor, with a piano at one end of it; and in front of the platform was a special semicircular table, presided over by a bland rubicund gentleman, to whom Ronald was forthwith introduced. Indeed, the newcomers were fortunate enough to find seats at this semicircular table; and when beverages were called for and pipes lit, they waited for the further continuance of the proceedings.

These were of an entirely simple and ingenuous character, and had no taint whatsoever of the ghastly make-believe of wit, the mean swagger, and facetious innuendo of the London music hall. Now a member of the Club, when loudly called upon by the general voice, would step up to the platform and sing some familiar Scotch ballad; and again one of the professional singers in attendance (they did not appear in swallow-tail and white tie, by the way, but in soberer attire) would "oblige" with something more ambitious; but throughout there was a paevailing tendency towards compositions with a chorus; and the chorus grew more universal and more enthusiastic as the evening proceeded. Then occasionally between the performances there occurred a considerable interval, during which the members of the Club would make brief visits to the other tables; and in this way Ronald made the acquaintance of a good number of those moderately convivial souls. For, if there was a tolerable amount of treating and its corresponding challenges, there was no drunkenness apparent anywhere; there was some loud talking; and Captain M'Taggart was unduly anxious that everybody should come and sit at the President's table; but the greatest hilarity did not exceed bounds. It was to be observed, however, that, as the evening drew on, it was the extremely sentimental songs that were the

chief favourites—those that mourned the bygone days of boyhood and youth, or told of the premature decease of some beloved Annie or Mary.

Ronald was once or twice pressed to sing; but he good-naturedly refused.

"Some other time, if I may have the chance, I will try to screw up my courage," he said. "And by that time ye'll have forgotten what Mrs. Menzies said: the East Lothian folk are wonderful for praising their own kith and kin."

As to letting old Mr. Jaap have a song or two to set to music, that was another and simpler matter; and he promised to hunt out one or two of them. In truth, it would not be difficult, as he himself perceived, to find something a little better than the "Caledonia's hills and dales" which was sung that night, and which was of a very familiar pattern indeed. And Ronald looked forward with not a little natural satisfaction to the possibility of one of his songs being sung in that resounding hall; a poet must have his audience somewhere; and this, at least, was more extensive than a handful of farm lads and lasses collected together in the barn at Inver-Mudal.

At about half-past eleven the entire company broke up and dispersed; and Ronald, after thanking his three companions very heartily for their hospitality during the evening, set off for his lodgings in the north of the city. He was quite enlivened and inspirited by this unusual whirl of gaiety; it had come into his sombre and lonely life as a startling surprise. The rattle of the piano—the resounding choruses—the eager talk of these boon-companions—all this was of an exciting nature; and as he walked away through the now darkened thoroughfares, he began to wonder whether he could not write some lilting verses in the old haphazard way. He had not even tried such a thing since he came to Glasgow; the measurement of surface areas and the classification of Dicotyledons did not lead him in that direction. But on such a gala-night as this, surely he might string some lines together—about Glasgow lads and lasses, and good-fellowship, and the delights of a roaring town? It would be an experiment, in any case.

Well, when he had got home and lit the gas, and sate down to the jingling task, it was not so difficult, after all.

But there was an undernote running through these verses that he had not contemplated when he set out. When the first glow of getting them together was over, he looked down the page, and then he put it away; in no circumstances could this kind of song find its way into the Harmony Club; and yet he was not altogether disappointed that it was so.

O Glasgow lasses are fair enough
And Glasgow lads are merry;
But I would be with my own dear maid,
A-wandering down Strath-Terry.

And she would be singing her morning song,
The song that the larks have taught her;
A song of the northern seas and hills,
And a song of Mudal-Water.

The bands go thundering through the streets,
The fifes and drums together;
Far rather I'd hear the grouse-cock crow
Among the purple heather;

And I would be on Ben Clebrig's brow,
To watch the red-deer stealing
In single file adown the glen
And past the summer sheiling.

O Glasgow lasses are fair enough,
And Glasgow lads are merry;
But ah, for the voice of my own dear maid,
A-singing adown Strath-Terry!

CHAPTER XXIX.

INDUCEMENTS.

RONALD'S friendship with the hospitable widow and his acquaintanceship with those three boon-companions of hers grew apace; and many a merry evening they all of them had together in the brilliant little parlour, Ronald singing his own or any other songs without stint, the big skipper telling elaborately facetious Highland stories, the widow bountiful with her cigars and her whisky-toddy. And yet he was ill, ill at ease. He would not admit to himself, of course, that he rather despised these new acquaintances—for were they not most generous and kind

towards him?—nor yet that the loud hilarity he joined in was on his part at times a trifle forced. Indeed, he could not very well have defined the cause of this disquietude and restlessness and almost despair that was present to his consciousness even when the laugh was at its loudest and the glasses going round most merrily. But the truth was he had begun to lose heart in his work. The first glow of determination that had enabled him to withstand the depression of the dull days and the monotonous labour had subsided now. The brilliant future the Americans had painted for him did not seem so attractive. Meenie was away; perhaps never to be met with more; and the old glad days that were filled with the light of her presence were all gone now and growing ever more and more distant. And in the solitude of the little room up there in the Port Dundas Road—with the gray atmosphere ever present at the windows, and the dull rumble of the carts and waggons without—he was now getting into a habit of pushing aside his books for a while, and letting his fancies go far afield; insomuch that his heart seemed to grow more and more sick within him, and more and more he grew to think that somehow life had gone all wrong with him.

There is in Glasgow a thoroughfare familiarly known as Balmanno Brae. It is in one of the poorer neighbourhoods of the town; and is in truth rather a squalid and uninteresting place; but it has the one striking peculiarity of being extraordinarily steep, having been built on the side of a considerable hill. Now one must have a powerful imagination to see in this long, abrupt, blue-gray thoroughfare—with its grimy pavements and house-fronts, and its gutters running with dirty water—any resemblance to the wide slopes of Ben Clebrig and the carolling rills that flow down to Loch Naver; but all the same Ronald had a curious fancy for mounting this long incline, and that at the hardest pace he could go. For sometimes, in that little room, he felt almost like a caged animal dying for a wider air, a more active work; and here at least was a height that enabled him to feel the power of his knees; while the mere upward progress was a kind of inspiriting thing, one always having a vague fancy that one is going to see farther in getting higher. Alas! there was but the one inevitable

termination to these repeated climbings; and that not the wide panorama embracing Loch Loyal and Ben Hope and the far Kyle of Tongue, but a wretched little lane called Rotten Row—a double line of gloomy houses, with here and there an older-fashioned cottage with a thatched roof, and with everywhere pervading the close atmosphere an odour of boiled herrings. And then again, looking back, there was no yellow and wide-shining Strath-Terry, with its knolls of purple heather and its devious rippling burns, but only the great, dark, grim, mysterious city, weltering in its smoke, and dully groaning, as it were, under the grinding burden of its monotonous toil.

As the Twelfth of August drew near he became more and more restless, He had written to Lord Ailine to say that, if he could be of any use, he would take a run up to Inver-Mudal for a week or so, just to see things started for the season; but Lord Ailine had considerately refused the offer, saying that everything seemed going on well enough, except, indeed, that Lugar the Gordon setter was in a fair way of being spoilt, for that, owing to Ronald's parting injunctions, there was not a man or boy about the place would subject the dog to any kind of chastisement or discipline whatever. And it sounded strange to Ronald to hear that he was still remembered away up there in the remote little hamlet.

On the morning of the day before the Twelfth his books did not get much attention. He kept going to the window to watch the arrivals at the railway station opposite, wondering whether this one or that was off and away to the wide moors and the hills. Then, about mid-day, he saw a young lad bring up four dogs—a brace of setters, a small spaniel, and a big brown retriever—and give them over in charge to a porter. Well, human nature could not stand this any longer. His books were no longer thought of; on went his Glengarry cap; and in a couple of minutes he was across the road and into the station, where the porter was hauling the dogs along the platform.

"Here, my man, I'll manage the doggies for ye," he said, getting hold of the chains and straps; and of course the dogs at once recognised in him a natural ally and were less alarmed. A shambling, bow-legged

porter hauling at them they could not understand at all; but in the straight figure and sun-tanned cheek and clear eye of the newcomer they recognised features familiar to them; and then he spoke to them as if he knew them.

"Ay, and what's your name, then?—Bruce, or Wallace, or Soldier?—but there'll no be much work for you for a while yet. It's you, you two bonnie lassies, that'll be amongst the heather the morn; and well I can see ye'll work together, and back each other, and just set an example to human folk. And if ye show yourselves just a wee bit eager at the beginning o' the day—well, well, well, we all have our faults, and that one soon wears off. And what's your names, then?—Lufra, or Nell, or Bess, or Fan? And you, you wise auld chiel—I'm thinking ye could get a grip o' a mallard that would make him imagine he had got back into his mother's nest—you're a wise one—the Free Kirk elder o' the lot"—for, indeed, the rest of them were all pawing at him, and licking his hands, and whimpering their friendship. The porter had to point out to him that he, the porter, could not stand there the whole day with "a' wheen dogs;" whereupon Ronald led these new companions of his along to the dog-box that had been provided for them, and there, when they had been properly secured, the porter left him. Ronald could still talk to them, however, and ask them questions; and they seemed to understand well enough; indeed, he had not spent so pleasant a half-hour for many and many a day.

There chanced to come along the platform a little, wiry, elderly man, with a wholesome-looking, weather-tanned face, who was carrying a bundle of fishing-rods over his shoulder; and seeing how Ronald was engaged he spoke to him in passing and began to talk about the dogs.

"Perhaps they're your dogs?" Ronald said.

"No, no, our folk are a' fishing folk," said the little old man, who was probably a gardener or something of the kind, and who seemed to take readily to this new acquaintance. "I've just been in to Glasgow to get a rod mended, and to bring out a new one that the laird has bought for himself."

He grinned in a curious sarcastic way.

"He's rather a wee man; and this rod—Lord sakes, ye

never saw such a thing! it would break the back o' a Samson—bless ye, the but o't's like a weaver's beam; and for our gudeman to buy a thing like that—well, rich folk hae queer ways o' spending their money."

He was a friendly old man; and this joke of his master having bought so tremendous an engine seemed to afford him so much enjoyment that when Ronald asked to be allowed to see this formidable weapon he said at once—

"Just you come along outside there, and we'll put it thegither, and ye'll see what kind o' salmon-rod an old man o' five foot five thinks he can cast wi'——"

"If it's no taking up too much of your time," Ronald suggested, but eager enough he was to get a salmon-rod into his fingers again.

"I've three quarters of an hour to wait," was the reply, "for I canna make out they train books ava."

They went out beyond the platform to an open space, and very speedily the big rod was put together. It was indeed an enormous thing; but a very fine rod, for all that; and so beautifully balanced and so beautifully pliant that Ronald, after having made one or two passes through the air with it, could not help saying to the old man, and rather wistfully too——

"I suppose ye dinna happen to have a reel about ye?"

"That I have," was the instant answer, "and a brand new hundred-yard line on it too. Would ye like to try a cast? I'm thinking ye ken something about it."

It was an odd kind of place to try the casting-power of a salmon-rod, this dismal no-man's-land of empty trucks and rusted railway-points and black ashes; but no sooner had Ronald begun to send out a good line—taking care to recover it so that it should not fray itself along the gritty ground—than the old man perceived he had to deal with no amateur.

"Man, ye're a dab, and no mistake! As clean a line as ever I saw cast! It's no the first time *you've* handled a salmon-rod, I'll be bound!"

"It's the best rod I've ever had in my hand," Ronald said, as he began to reel in the line again. "I'm much

obliged to ye for letting me try a cast—it's many a day now since I threw a line."

They took the rod down and put it in its case.

"I'm much obliged to ye," Ronald repeated (for the mere handling of this rod had fired his veins with a strange kind of excitement). "Will ye come and take a dram?"

"No, thank ye, I'm a teetotaler," said the other; and then he glanced at Ronald curiously. "But ye seem to ken plenty about dogs and about fishing and so on—what are ye doing in Glasgow and the morn the Twelfth? Ye are not a town lad?"

"No, I'm not; but I have to live in the town at present," was the answer. "Well, good-day to ye; and many thanks for the trial o' the rod."

"Good-day, my lad; I wish I had your years and the strength o' your shouthers."

In passing Ronald said good-bye again to the handsome setters and the spaniel and the old retriever; and then he went on and out of the station, but it was not to return to his books. The seeing of so many people going away to the north, the talking with the dogs, the trial of the big salmon-rod, had set his brain a little wild. What if he were to go back and beg of the withered old man to take him with him—ay, even as the humblest of gillies, to watch, gaff in hand, by the side of the broad silver-rippling stream, or to work in a boat on a blue-ruffled loch! To jump into a third-class carriage and know that the firm inevitable grip of the engine was dragging him away into the clearer light, the wider skies, the glad free air! No wonder they said that fisher folk were merry folk; the very jolting of the engine would in such a case have a kind of music in it; how easily could one make a song that would match with the swing of the train! It was in his head now, as he rapidly and blindly walked away along the Cowcaddens, and along the New City Road, and along the Western Road—random rhymes, random verses, that the jolly company could sing together as the engine thundered along—

Out of the station we rattle away,
Wi' a clangour of axle and wheel;
There's a merrier sound that we know in the north—
The merry, merry shriek of the reel!

O you that shouther the heavy iron gun,
And have steep, steep braes to speel—
We envy you not; enough is for us
The merry, merry shriek of the reel!

When the twenty-four pounder leaps in the air,
And the line flies out with a squeal—
O that is the blessedest sound upon earth,
The merry, merry shriek of the reel!

So here's to good fellows!—for them that are not,
Let them gang and sup kail wi' the deil!
We've other work here—so look out, my lads,
For the first, sharp shriek of the reel!

He did not care to put the rough-jolting verses down on paper, for the farther and the more rapidly he walked away out of the town the more was his brain busy with pictures and visions of all that they would be doing at this very moment at Inver-Mudal.

"God bless me," he said to himself, "I could almost swear I hear the dogs whimpering in the kennels."

There would be the young lads looking after the panniers and the ponies; and the head-keeper up at the lodge discussing with Lord Ailine the best way of taking the hill in the morning, supposing the wind to remain in the same direction; and Mr. Murray at the door of the inn, smoking his pipe as usual; and the pretty Nelly indoors waiting upon the shooting party just arrived from the south and listening to all their wants. And Harry would be wondering, amid all this new bustle and turmoil, why his master did not put in an appearance; perhaps scanning each succeeding dog-cart or waggonette that came along the road; and then, not so blithe-spirited, making his way to the Doctor's house. Comfort awaited him there, at all events; for Ronald had heard that Meenie had taken pity on the little terrier, and that it was a good deal oftener with her than at the inn. Only all this seemed now so strange; the great dusk city lay behind him like a nightmare from which he had but partially escaped, and that with tightened breath; and he seemed to be straining his ears to catch those soft and friendly voices so far away. And then later on, as the darkness fell, what would be happening there? The lads would be coming along to the inn; lamps lit, and chairs

drawn in to the table; Mr. Murray looking in at times with his jokes, and perhaps with a bit of a treat on so great an occasion. And surely—surely—as they begin to talk of this year and of last year and of the changes—surely some one will say—perhaps Nelly, as she brings in the ale—but surely some one will say—as a mere word of friendly remembrance—"Well, I wish Ronald was here now with his pipes, to play us *The Barren Rocks of Aden*." Only a single friendly word of remembrance—it was all that he craved.

He struck away south through Dowanhill and Partick, and crossed the Clyde at Govan Ferry; then he made his way back to the town and Jamaica Street bridge; and finally, it being now dusk, looked in to see whether Mrs. Menzies was at leisure for the evening.

"What's the matter, Ronald?" she said instantly, as he entered, for she noticed that his look was careworn and strange.

"Well, Katie, lass, I don't quite know what's the matter wi' me, but I feel as if I just couldna go back to that room of mine and sit there by myself—at least not yet; I think I've been put a bit daft wi' seeing the people going away for the Twelfth; and if ye wouldna mind my sitting here for a while with ye, for the sake o' company——"

"Mind!" she said. "Mind! What I do mind is that you should be ganging to that lodging-house at a', when there's a room—and a comfortable room, though I say it that shouldn't—in this very house at your disposal, whenever ye like to bring your trunk till it. There it is—an empty room, used by nobody—and who more welcome to it than my ain cousin? I'll tell ye what, Ronald, my lad, ye're wearing yoursel' away on a gowk's errand. Your certificate! How do ye ken ye'll get your certificate? How do ye ken ye will do such great things with it when ye get it? You're a young man; you'll no be a young man twice; what I say is, take your fling when ye can get it! Look at Jimmy Laidlaw—he's off the first thing in the morning to the Mearns—£15 for his share of the shooting—do you think he can shoot like you?—and why should ye no have had your share too?"

"Well, it was very kind of you, Katie, woman, to make the offer; but—but—there's a time for everything."

"Man, I could have driven ye out every morning in the dog-cart! and welcome. I'm no for having young folk waste the best years of their life, and find out how little use the rest o't's to them—no that I consider mysel' one o' the auld folk yet——"

"You, Katie dear!" whined old mother Paterson from her millinery corner. "You—just in the prime o' youth, one micht say! you one o' the auld folk?—ay, in thirty years' time maybe!"

"Take my advice, Ronald, my lad," said the widow boldly. "Dinna slave away for naething—because folk have put fancy notions into your head. Have a better opinion o' yoursel'! Take your chance o' life when ye can get it—books and books, what's the use o' books?"

"Too late now—I've made my bed and maun lie on it," he said gloomily; but then he seemed to try to shake off this depression. "Well, well, lass, Rome was not built in a day. And if I were to throw aside my books, what then? How would that serve? Think ye that that would make it any the easier for me to get a three-weeks' shooting wi' Jimmy Laidlaw?"

"And indeed ye might have had that in any case, and welcome," said Kate Menzies, with a toss of her head. "Who is Jimmy Laidlaw, I wonder! But it's no use arguin' wi' ye, Ronald, lad; he that will to Cupar maun to Cupar; only I dinna like to see ye looking just ill."

"Enough said, lass; I didna come here to torment ye with my wretched affairs," he answered; and at this moment the maidservant entered to lay the cloth for supper, while Mrs. Menzies withdrew to make herself gorgeous for the occasion.

He was left with old mother Paterson.

"There's none so blind as them that winna see," she began, in her whining voice.

"What is't?"

"Ay, Ay," she continued, in a sort of maundering soliloquy, "a braw woman like that—and free-handed as the day—she could have plenty offers if she liked. But there's none so blind as them that winna see. There's

Mr. Laidlaw there, a good-looking man, and wan wi' a good penny at the bank; and wouldna he just jump at the chance, if she had a nod or a wink for him? But Katie was aye like that—headstrong; she would aye have her ain way—and there she is, a single woman, a braw, handsome, young woman—and weel provided for—weel provided for—only it's no every one that takes her fancy. A prize like that, to be had for the asking! Dear me—but there's nane so blind as them that winna see"

It was not by any means the first time that mother Paterson had managed to drop a few dark hints—and much to his embarrassment, moreover, for he could not pretend to ignore their purport. Nay, there was something more than that. Kate Menzie's rough-and-ready friendliness for her cousin had of late become more and more pronounced—almost obtrusive, indeed. She wanted to have the mastery of his actions altogether. She would have him pitch his books aside and come for a drive with her whether he was in the humour or no. She offered him the occupancy of a room which, if it was not actually within the tavern, communicated with it. She seemed unable to understand why he should object to her paying £15 to obtain for him a share in a small bit of conjoint shooting out at the Mearns. And so forth in many ways. Well, these things, taken by themselves, he might have attributed to a somewhat tempestuous good-nature; but here was this old woman, whenever a chance occurred, whining about the folly of people who did not see that Katie dear was so handsome and generous and so marvellous a matrimonial prize. Nor could he very well tell her to mind her own business, for that would be admitting that he understood her hints.

However, on this occasion he had not to listen long; for presently Mrs Menzies returned, smiling, good-natured, radiant in further finery; and then they all had supper together; and she did her best to console her cousin for being cooped up in the great city on the eve of the Twelfth. And Ronald was very grateful to her; and perhaps, in his eager desire to keep up this flow of high spirits, and to forget what was happening at Inver-Mudal and about to happen, he may have drunk a little too

much; at all events, when Laidlaw and Jaap and the skipper came in they found him in a very merry mood, and Kate Menzies equally hilarious and happy. Songs? —he was going to no Harmony Club that night, he declared—he would sing them as many songs as ever they liked—but he was not going to forsake his cousin. Nor were the others the least unwilling to remain where they were; for here they were in privacy, and the singing was better, and the liquor unexceptionable. The blue smoke rose quietly in the air; the fumes of Long John warmed blood and brain; and then from time to time they heard of the brave, or beautiful, or heart-broken maidens of Scotch song—Maggie Lauder, or Nelly Munro, or Barbara Allan, as the chance might be—and music and good fellowship and whisky all combined to throw a romantic halo round these simple heroines.

"But sing us one o' your own, Ronald, my lad—there's none better, and that's what I say!" cried the widow; and as she happened to be passing his chair at the time—going to the sideboard for some more lemons, she slapped him on the shoulder by way of encouragement.

"One o' my own?" said he. "But which—which—lass? Oh, well, here's one."

He lay back in his chair, and quite at haphazard, and carelessly and jovially began to sing—in that clearly penetrating voice that neither tobacco smoke nor whisky seemed to affect—

Roses white, roses red,
Roses in the lane,
Tell me, roses red and white,
Where is———

And then suddenly something seemed to grip his heart. But the stumble was only for the fiftieth part of a second. He continued:

Where is Jeannie gane?

And so he finished the careless little verses. Nevertheless, Kate Menzies, returning to her seat, had noticed that quick, instinctive pulling of himself up.

"And who's Jeannie when she's at home?" she asked saucily.

"Jeannie?" he said, with apparent indifference. "Jeannie? There's plenty o' that name about."

"Ay; and how many o' them are at Inver-Mudal?" she asked, regarding him shrewdly, and with an air which he resented.

But the little incident passed. There was more singing, drinking, smoking, talking of nonsense and laughing. And at last the time came for the merry companions to separate; and he went away home through the dark streets alone. He had drunk too much, it must be admitted; but he had a hard head; and he had kept his wits about him; and even now as he ascended the stone stairs to his lodgings he remembered with a kind of shiver, and also with not a little heartfelt satisfaction, how he had just managed to save himself from bringing Meenie's name before that crew.

CHAPTER XXX.

ENTANGLEMENTS.

AND then came along the great evening on which the first of Ronald's songs that Mr. Jaap had set to music was to be sung at the Harmony Club. Ronald had unluckily got into the way of going a good deal to that club. It was a relief from weary days and vain regrets; it was a way of escape from the too profuse favours that Kate Menzies wished to shower upon him. Moreover, he had become very popular there. His laugh was hearty; his jokes and sarcasms were always good-natured; he could drink with the best without getting quarrelsome. His acquaintanceship rapidly extended; his society was eagerly bid for in the rough-and-ready fashion that prevails towards midnight; and long after the club was closed certain of these boon-companions would "keep it up" in this or the other bachelor's lodgings, while through the open window there rang out into the empty street the oft-repeated chorus—

"We are na fou', we're nae that fou',
But just a drappie in our e'e;
The cock may craw, the day may daw,
And aye we'll taste the barley bree!"

The night-time seemed to go by so easily; the daytime was so slow. He still did his best, it is true, to get on with this work that had so completely lost all its fascination for him; and he tried hard to banish dreams. For one thing, he had gathered together all the fragments of verse he had written about Meenie, and had added thereto the little sketch of Inver-Mudal she had given him; and that parcel he had resolutely locked away, so that he should no longer be tempted to waste the hours in idle musings, and in useless catechising of himself as to how he came to be in Glasgow at all. He had forborne to ask from Maggie the answer that Meenie had sent to her letter. In truth, there were many such; for there was almost a constant correspondence between these two; and as the chief subject of Maggie's writings was always and ever Ronald, there were no doubt references to him in the replies that came from Inver-Mudal. But he only heard vaguely of these; he did not call often at his brother's house; and he grew to imagine that the next definite news he would hear about Meenie would be to the effect that she had been sent to live with the Stuarts of Glengask, with a view to her possible marriage with some person in their rank of life.

There was a goodly to-do at the Harmony Club on the evening of the production of the new song; for Ronald, as has been said, was much of a favourite; and his friends declared that if Jaap's music was at all up to the mark, then the new piece would be placed on the standard and permanent list. Mr. Jaap's little circle, on the other hand, who had heard the air, were convinced that the refrain would be caught at once; and as the success of the song seemed thus secure, Mrs. Menzies had resolved to celebrate the occasion by a supper after the performance, and Jimmy Laidlaw had presented her, for that purpose, with some game which he declared was of his own shooting.

"What's the use o' making such a fuss about nothing?" Ronald grumbled.

"What?" retorted the big skipper facetiously. "Naething? Is bringing out a new poet naething?"

Now this drinking song, as it turned out, was a very

curious kind of drinking song. Observe that it was written by a young fellow of eight-and-twenty; of splendid physique, and of as yet untouched nerve, who could not possibly have had wide experience of the vanities and disappointments of human life. What iron had entered into his soul, then, that a gay and joyous drinking song should have been written in this fashion?—

Good friends and neighbours, life is short,
And man, they say, is made to mourn;
Dame Fortune makes us all her sport,
And laughs our very best to scorn:
Well, well; we'll have, if that be so,
A merry glass before we go.

The blue-eyed lass will change her mind,
And give her kisses otherwhere;
And she'll be cruel that was kind,
And pass you by with but a stare:
Well, well; we'll have, if that be so,
A merry glass before we go.

The silly laddie sits and fills
Wi' dreams and schemes the first o' life;
And then comes heap on heap o' ills,
And squalling bairns and scolding wife:
Well, well; we'll have, if that be so,
A merry glass before we go.

Come stir the fire and make us warm;
The night without is dark and wet;
An hour or twa 'twill do nae harm
The dints o' fortune to forget:
So now we'll have, come weal or woe,
Another glass before we go.

To bonny lasses, honest blades,
We'll up and give a hearty cheer;
Contention is the worst of trades—
We drink their health, both far and near:
And so we'll have, come weal or woe,
Another glass before we go.

And here's ourselves!—no much to boast;
For man's a wean that lives and learns;
And some win hame, and some are lost;
But still—we're all John Thomson's bairns!
So here, your hand!—come weal or woe,
Another glass before we go!

"*And some win hame, and some are lost*"—this was a curious note to strike in a bacchanalian song; but of course in that atmosphere of tobacco and whisky and loud-voiced merriment such minor touches were altogether unnoticed.

"Gentlemen," called out the rubicund chairman, rapping on the table, "silence, if you please. Mr. Aikman is about to favour us with a new song written by our recently-elected member, Mr. Ronald Strang, the music by our old friend Mr. Jaap. Silence—silence, if you please."

Mr. Aikman, who was a melancholy-looking youth, with a white face, straw-coloured hair, and almost colourless eyes, stepped on to the platform, and after the accompanist had played a few bars of prelude, began the song. Feeble as the young man looked, he had, notwithstanding, a powerful baritone voice; and the air was simple, with a well-marked swing in it; so that the refrain—at first rather uncertain and experimental—became after the first verse more and more general, until it may be said that the whole room formed the chorus. And from the very beginning it was clear that the new song was going to be a great success. Any undercurrent of reflection—or even of sadness—there might be in it was not perceived at all by this roaring assemblage; the refrain was the practical and actual thing; and when once they had fairly grasped the air, they sang the chorus with a will. Nay, amid the loud burst of applause that followed the last verse came numerous cries for an encore; and these increased until the whole room was clamorous; and then the pale-faced youth had to step back on to the platform and get through all of the verses again.

> "*So here, your hand!—come weal or woe,*
> *Another glass before we go!*"

roared the big skipper and Jimmy Laidlaw with the best of them; and then in the renewed thunder of cheering that followed—

"Man, I wish Kate Menzies was here," said the one; and—

"Your health, Ronald, lad; ye've done the trick this time," said the other.

"Gentlemen," said the chairman, again calling them to

silence, "I propose that the thanks of the club be given to these two members whom I have named, and who have kindly allowed us to place this capital song on our permanent list."

"I second that, Mr. Chairman," said a little, round, fat man, with a beaming countenance and a bald head; "and I propose that we sing that song every night just afore we leave."

But this last suggestion was drowned amidst laughter and cries of dissent. "What?—instead of 'Auld Lang Syne'?" "Ye're daft, John Campbell." "Would ye hae the ghost o' Robbie Burns turning up?" Indeed, the chairman had to interpose and suavely say that while the song they had just heard would bring any such pleasant evenings as they spent together to an appropriate close, still, they would not disturb established precedent; there would be many occasions, he hoped, for them to hear this production of two of their most talented members.

In the interval of noise and talk and laughter that followed, it seemed to Ronald that half the people in the hall wanted him to drink with them. Fame came to him in the shape of unlimited proffers of glasses of whisky; and he experienced so much of the delight of having become a public character as consisted in absolute strangers assuming the right to make his acquaintance off-hand. Of course they were all members of the same club; and in no case was very strict etiquette observed within these four walls; nevertheless Ronald found that he had immediately and indefinitely enlarged the circle of his acquaintances; and that this meant drink.

"Another glass?" he said, to one of those strangers who had thus casually strolled up to the table where he sate. "My good friend, there was nothing said in that wretched song about a caskful. I've had too many other ones already."

However, relief came; the chairman hammered on the table; the business of the evening was resumed; and the skipper, Jaap, Laidlaw, and Ronald were left to themselves.

Now there is no doubt that this little circle of friends was highly elated over the success of the new song; and

Ronald had been pleased enough to hear the words he had written so quickly caught up and echoed by that, to him, big assemblage. Probably, too, they had all of them, in the enthusiasm of the moment, been somewhat liberal in their cups; at all events, a little later on in the evening, when Jimmy Laidlaw stormily demanded that Ronald should sing a song from the platform—to show them what East Lothian could do, as Kate Menzies had said—Ronald did not at once, as usual, shrink from the thought of facing so large an audience. It was the question of the accompaniment, he said. He had had no practice in singing to a piano. He would put the man out. Why should he not sing here—if sing he must—at the table where they were sitting? That was what he was used to; he had no skill in keeping correct time; he would only bother the accompanist, and bewilder himself.

"No, I'll tell ye what it is, Ronald, my lad," his friend Jaap said to him. "I'll play the accompaniment for ye, if ye pick out something I'm familiar wi'; and don't you heed me; you look after yourself. Even if ye change the key—and that's not likely—I'll look after ye. Is't a bargain?"

Well, he was not afraid—on this occasion. It was announced from the chair that Mr. Ronald Strang, to whom they were already indebted, would favour the company with "The MacGregors' Gathering," accompanied by Mr. Jaap; and in the rattle of applause that followed this announcement, Ronald made his way across the floor and went up the couple of steps leading to the platform. Why he had consented he hardly knew, nor did he stay to ask. It was enough that he had to face this long hall, and its groups of faces seen through the pale haze of the tobacco smoke; and then the first notes of the piano startled him into the necessity of getting into the same key. He began—a little bewildered, perhaps, and hearing his own voice too consciously—

> *"The moon's on the lake, and the mist's on the brae,*
> *And the clan has a name that is nameless by day."*

"Louder, man, louder!" the accompanist muttered, under his breath.

Whether it was this admonition, or whether it was that he gained confidence from feeling himself in harmony with the firm-struck notes of the accompaniment, his voice rose in clearness and courage, and he got through the first verse with very fair success. Nay, when he came to the second, and the music went into a pathetic minor, the sensitiveness of his ear still carried him through bravely—

"Glenorchy's proud mountains, Colchurn and her towers,
Glenstrae and Glen Lyon no longer are ours—
We're landless, landless, landless, Gregalach."

All this was very well done; for he began to forget his audience a little, and to put into his singing something of the expression that had come naturally enough to him when he was away on the Clebrig slopes or wandering along Strath-Terry. As for the audience—when he had finished and stepped back to his seat—they seemed quite electrified. Not often had such a clear-ringing voice penetrated that murky atmosphere. But nothing would induce Ronald to repeat the performance.

"What made me do it!" he kept asking himself. "What made me do it? Bless me, surely I'm no fou'?"

"Ye've got a most extraordinarily fine voice, Mr. Strang," the chairman said, in his most complaisant manner, "I hope it's not the last time ye'll favour us."

Ronald did not answer this. He seemed at once moody and restless. Presently he said—

"Come away, lads, come away. In God's name let's get a breath o' fresh air—the smoke o' this place is like the bottomless pit."

"Then let's gang down and have a chat wi' Kate Menzies," said Jimmy Laidlaw at once.

"Ye're after that supper, Jimmy!" the big skipper said facetiously.

"What for no? Would ye disappoint the woman; and her sae anxious to hear what happened to Strang's poetry? Come on, Ronald—she'll be as proud as Punch. And we'll tell her about 'The MacGregors' Gathering'—she said East Lothian would show them something."

"Very well, then—very well; anything to get out o'

here," Ronald said; and away they all went down to the tavern.

The widow received them most graciously; and very sumptuous indeed was the entertainment she had provided for them. She knew that the drinking song would be successful—if the folk had common sense and ears. And he had sung "The MacGregors' Gathering" too?—well, had they ever heard singing like that before?

"But they have been worrying you?" she said, glancing shrewdly at him. "Or, what's the matter—ye look down in the mouth—indeed, Ronald, ye've never looked yoursel' since the night ye came in here just before the grouse shooting began. Here, man, drink a glass o' champagne; that'll rouse ye up."

Old mother Paterson was at this moment opening a bottle.

"Not one other drop of anything, Katie, lass, will I drink this night," Ronald said.

"What? A lively supper we're likely to have, then!" the widow cried. "Where's your spunk, man? I think ye're broken-hearted about some lassie—that's what it is! Here, now."

She brought him the foaming glass of champagne; but he would not look at it.

"And if I drink to your health out of the same glass?"

She touched the glass with her lips.

"There, now, if you're a man, ye'll no refuse noo."

Nor could he. And then the supper came along; and there was eating and talking and laughing and further drinking, until a kind of galvanised hilarity sprang up once more amongst them. And she would have Ronald declare to them which of the lasses in Sutherlandshire it was who had broken his heart for him; and, in order to get her away from the subject, he was very amenable in her hands, and would do anything she bade him, singing first one song and then another, and not refusing the drinking of successive toasts. As for the others, they very prudently declined having anything to do with champagne. But Ronald was her pet, her favourite; and she had got a special box of cigars for him—all wrapped up in silverfoil and labelled; and she would have them tell her over and

over again how Ronald's voice sounded in the long hall when he sang—

"Glenstrae and Glen Lyon no longer are ours,"

and she would have them tell her again of the thunders of cheering that followed—

"Well, well; we'll have, if that be so,
Another glass before we go."

Nay, she would have them try a verse or two of it there and then—led by Mr. Jaap; and she herself joined in the chorus; and they clinked their glasses together, and were proud of their vocalisation and their good comradeship. Indeed, they prolonged this jovial evening as late as the law allowed them! and then the widow said gaily—

"There's that poor man thinks I'm gaun to allow him to gang away to that wretched hole o' a lodging o' his, where he's just eating his heart out wi' solitariness and a wheen useless books. But I'm not. I ken better than that, Ronald, my lad. Whilst ye've a' been singing and roaring, I've had a room get ready for ye; and there ye'll sleep this night, my man—for I'm not going to hae ye march away through the lonely streets, and may be cut your throat ere daybreak; and ye can lock yourself in, if ye're feared that any warlock or bogle is likely to come and snatch ye; and in the morning ye'll come down and have your breakfast wi' auntie Paterson and me—and then—what then? What do ye think? When the dog-cart's at the door, and me gaun to drive ye oot to Campsie Glen? There, laddie, that's the programme; and wet or dry is my motto. If it's wet we'll sing 'Come under my plaidie'; and we'll take a drop o' something comfortable wi' us to keep out the rain."

"I wish I was gaun wi' ye, Mistress," the big skipper said.

"Two's company and three's none." said Kate Menzies, with a frank laugh. "Is't a bargain, Ronald?"

"It's a bargain, lass; and there's my hand on't," he said, "Now, where's this room—for I don't know whether it has been the smoke, or the singing, or the whisky, or all o' them together, but my head's like a ship sailing before the wind, without any helm to steer her."

"Your head" she said proudly. "Your head's like

iron, man ; there's nothing the matter wi' ye. And here's Alec—he'll show you where your room is ; and in the morning ring for whatever ye want ; mind ye, a glass o' champagne and angostura bitters is just first-rate ; and we'll have breakfast at whatever hour ye please—and then we'll be off to Campsie Glen."

The little party now broke up, each going his several way ; and Ronald, having bade them all good-night, followed the ostler-lad Alec along one or two gloomy corridors until he found the room that had been prepared for him. As he got to bed he was rather sick and sorry about the whole night's proceedings, he scarcely knew why ; and his thinking faculty was in a nebulous condition ; and he only vaguely knew that he would rather not have pledged himself to go to Campsie Glen on the following morning. No matter—"*another glass before we go*," that was the last of the song they had all shouted : he had forgotten that other line—"*and some win hame, and some are lost.*"

CHAPTER XXXI.

CAMPSIE GLEN

THE next morning, between nine and ten o'clock, there was a rapping at his door, and then a further rapping, and then he awoke—confused, uncertain as to his whereabouts, and with his head going like a threshing machine. Again there came the loud rapping.

"Come in, then," he called aloud.

The door was opened, and there was the young widow, smiling and jocund as the morn, and very smartly attired ; and alongside of her was a servant-lass bearing a small tray, on which were a tumbler, a pint bottle of champagne, and some angostura bitters.

"Bless me, woman," he said, "I was wondering where I was. And what's this now ?—do ye want to make a drunkard o' me ? "

"Not I," said Kate Menzies blithely, "I want to make a man o' ye. Ye'll just take a glass o' this, Ronald, my lad ; and then ye'll get up and come down to breakfast ; for we're going to have a splendid drive. The weather's as

bright and clear as a new shilling; and I've been up since seven o'clock, and I'm free for the day now. Here ye are, lad; this'll put some life into ye."

She shook a few drops of bitters into the tumbler, and then poured out a foaming measure of the amber-coloured wine, and offered it to him. He refused to take it.

"I canna look at it, lass. There was too much o' that going last night."

"And the very reason you should take a glass now!" she said. "Well, I'll leave it on the mantelpiece, and ye can take it when ye get up. Make haste, Ronald, lad; it's a pity to lose so fine a morning."

When they had left, he dressed as rapidly as possible, and went down. Breakfast was awaiting him—though it did not tempt him much. And then, by and by, the smart dog-cart was at the door; and a hamper was put in; and Kate Menzies got up and took the reins. There was no sick-and-sorriness about her at all events. She was radiant and laughing and saucy; she wore a driving-coat fastened at the neck by a horse-shoe brooch of brilliants, and a white straw hat with a wide-sweeping jet-black ostrich feather. It was clear that the tavern was a paying concern.

"And why will ye aye sit behind, Mr. Strang" mother Paterson whined, as she made herself comfortable in front. "I am sure Katie would rather have ye here than an auld wife like me. You could talk to her ever so much better."

"That would be a way to go driving through Glasgow town," he said, as he swung himself up on the back seat; "a man in front and a woman behind! Never you fear; there can be plenty of talking done as it is."

But as they drove away through the city—and even Glasgow looked quite bright and cheerful on this sunny morning, and there was a stirring of cool air that was grateful enough to his throbbing temples—it appeared that the buxom widow wanted to have most of the talking to herself. She was very merry; and laughed at his penitential scorn of himself and was for spurring him on to further poetical efforts.

"East Lothian for ever!" she was saying, as they got away out by the north of the town. "Didna I tell them? Ay, and ye've got to do something better yet, Ronald, my

lad, than the 'other glass before we go.' You're no at that time o' life yet to talk as if everything had gone wrong; and the blue-eyed lass—what blue-eyed lass was it, I wonder, that passed ye by with but a stare? Let her, and welcome, the hussy; there's plenty others. But no, my lad, what I want ye to write is a song about Scotland, and the East Lothian part o't especially. Ye've no lived long enough in the Hielans to forget your ain country, have ye? and where's there a song about Scotland nowadays? 'Caledonia's hills and dales'?—stuff!—I wonder Jaap would hae bothered his head about rubbish like that. No, no; we'll show them whether East Lothian canna do the trick!—and it's no the Harmony Club but the City Hall o' Glasgow that ye'll hear that song sung in—that's better like! Ye mind what Robbie says, Ronald, my lad?—

> "'*E'en then a wish, I mind its power—*
> *A wish that to my latest hour*
> *Shall strongly heave my breast—*
> *That I for poor auld Scotland's sake,*
> *Some usefu' plan or book could make,*
> *Or sing a sang at least.*'

That's what ye've got to do yet, my man."

And so they bowled along the wide whinstone road, out into this open landscape that seemed to lie behind a thin veil of pale-blue smoke. It was the country, no doubt; but a kind of sophisticated country; there were occasional grimy villages and railway-embankments and canals and what not; and the pathway that ran alongside the wide highway was of black ashes—not much like a Sutherlandshire road. However, as they got still farther away from the town matters improved. There were hedges and woods—getting a touch of the golden autumn on their foliage now; the landscape grew brighter; those hills far ahead of them rose into a fairly clear blue sky. And then the brisk motion and the fresher air seemed to drive away from him the dismal recollections of the previous night; he ceased to upbraid himself for having been induced to sing before all those people; he would atone for the recklessness of his potations by taking greater care in the future. So that when in due course of time they reached the inn

at the foot of Campsie Glen, and had the horse and trap put up, and set out to explore the beauties of that not too savage solitude, he was in a sufficiently cheerful frame of mind, and Kate Menzies had no reason to complain of her companion.

They had brought a luncheon basket with them; and as he had refused the proffered aid of a stable-lad, he had to carry this himself, and Kate Menzies was a liberal provider. Accordingly, as they began to make their way up the steep and slippery ascent—for rain had recently fallen, and the narrow path was sloppy enough—he had to leave the two women to look after themselves; and a fine haphazard scramble and hauling and pushing—with screams of fright and bursts of laughter—ensued. This was hardly the proper mood in which to seek out Nature in her sylvan retreats; but the truth is that the glen itself did not wear a very romantic aspect. No doubt there were massive boulders in the bed of the stream; and they had to clamber past precipitous rocks; and overhead was a wilderness of foliage. But everything was dull-hued somehow, and damp-looking, and dismal; the green-mossed boulders, the stems of the trees, the dark red earth were all of a sombre hue; while here and there the eye caught sight of a bit of newspaper, or of an empty soda-water bottle, or perchance of the non-idyllic figure of a Glasgow youth seated astride a fallen bough, a pot-hat on his head and a Manilla cheroot in his mouth. But still, it was more of the country than the Broomielaw; and when Kate and her companion had to pause in their panting struggle up the slippery path, and after she had recovered her breath sufficiently to demand a halt, she would turn to pick ferns from the dripping rocks, or to ask Ronald if there were any more picturesque place than this in Sutherlandshire. Now Ronald was not in the least afflicted by the common curse of travellers—the desire for comparison; he was well content to say that it was a "pretty bit glen"; for one thing his attention was chiefly devoted to keeping his footing, for the heavy basket was a sore encumbrance.

However, after some further climbing, they reached certain drier altitudes; and there the hamper was deposited, while they looked out for such trunks or big stones as

would make convenient seats. The old woman was speechless from exhaustion; Kate was laughing at her own breathlessness, or miscalling the place for having dirtied her boots and her skirts; while Ronald was bringing things together for their comfort, so that they could have their luncheon in peace. This was not quite the same kind of a luncheon party as that he had attended on the shores of the far northern loch—with Miss Carry complacently regarding the silver-clear salmon lying on the smooth, dry greensward; and the American talking in his friendly fashion of the splendid future that lay before a capable and energetic young fellow in the great country beyond the seas; while all around them the sweet air was blowing, and the clear light shining, and the white clouds sailing high over the Clebrig slopes. Things were changed with him since then—he did not himself know how much they had changed. But in all circumstances he was abundantly good-natured and grateful for any kindness shown him; and as Kate Menzies had projected this trip mainly on his account, he did his best to promote good-fellowship, and was serviceable and handy, and took her raillery in excellent part.

"Katie dear," whimpered old mother Paterson, as Ronald took out the things from the hamper, "ye jist spoil every one that comes near ye. Such extravagance—such waste—many's the time I wish ye would get married, and have a man to look after ye——"

"Stop your havering—who would marry an auld woman like me?" said Mrs. Menzies with a laugh. "Ay, and what's the extravagance, noo, that has driven ye oot o' your mind?"

"Champagne again!" the old woman said, shaking her head. "Champagne again! Dear me, it's like a Duke's house——"

"What, ye daft auld craytur? Would ye have me take my cousin Ronald for his first trip to Campsie Glen, and bring out a gill o' whisky in a soda-water bottle?"

"Indeed, Katie, lass, ye needna have brought one thing or the other for me," he said. "It's a drop o' water, and nothing else, that will serve my turn."

"We'll see about that," she said confidently.

Her provisioning was certainly of a sumptuous nature—far more sumptuous, indeed, than the luncheons the rich Americans used to have carried down for them to the loch-side, and a perfect banquet as compared with the frugal bit of cold beef and bread that Lord Ailine and his friends allowed themselves on the hill. Then, as regards the champagne, she would take no refusal—he had to submit, She was in the gayest of moods; she laughed and joked; nay, at one point, she raised her glass aloft, and waved it round her head, and sang—

> *"O send Lewie Gordon hame,*
> *And the lad I daurna name;*
> *Though his back be at the wa',*
> *Here's to him that's far awa'!"*

"What, what, lass?" Ronald cried grimly. "Are ye thinking ye're in a Highland glen? Do ye think it was frae places like this that the lads were called out to follow Prince Charlie?"

"I carena—I carena!" she said; for what had trivial details of history to do with a jovial picnic in Campsie Glen? "Come, Ronald, lad, tune up! Hang the Harmony Club!—give us a song in the open air!"

"Here goes, then—

> *'It was about the Martinmas time,*
> *And a gay time it was then, O,*
> *That our guidwife had puddins to mak',*
> *And she boiled them in the pan, O'"*—

and then rang out the chorus, even the old mother Paterson joining in with a feeble treble—

> *"O the barrin' o' our door, weel, weel, weel,*
> *And the barrin' o' our door, weel!"*

"Your health and song, Ronald!" she cried, when he had finished—or rather when they all had finished. "Man, if there was just a laddie here wi' a fiddle or a penny whistle I'd get up and dance a Highland Schottische wi' ye—auld as I am!"

After luncheon, they set out for further explorations (having deposited the basket in a secret place) and always

Kate Menzie's laugh was the loudest, her jokes the merriest.

"Auld, say ye?" mother Paterson complained. "A lassie—a very lassie! Ye can skip about like a twa-year-auld colt."

By and by they made their devious and difficult way down the glen again; and they had tea at the inn; and then they set out to drive back to Glasgow—and there was much singing the while. That is, up to a certain point; for this easy homeward drive, as it turned out, was destined to be suddenly and sharply stopped short, and that in a way that might have produced serious consequences. They were bowling merrily along, taking very little heed of anything on either side of them, when, as it chanced, a small boy who had gone into a field to recover a kite that had dropped there, came up unobserved behind the hedge, and threw the kite over, preparatory to his struggling through himself. The sudden appearance of this white thing startled the cob! it swerved to the other side of the road, hesitated, and was like to rear, and then getting an incautious cut from Kate's whip, away it tore along the highway, getting completely the mastery of her. Ronald got up behind.

"Give me the reins, lass," he called to her.

"I'll manage him—the stupid beast!" she said; with her teeth shut firm.

But all her pulling seemed to make no impression on the animal—nay, the trap was now swaying and jolting about in a most ominous manner.

"If ye meet anything, we're done for, Kate—run the wheel into the hedge."

It was excellent advice, if it could have been properly followed; but unluckily, just at the very moment when, with all her might and main, she twisted the head of the cob to the side of the road, there happened to be a deep ditch there. Over the whole thing went—Ronald and Mrs. Menzies being pitched clean into the hedge; mother Paterson, not hanging on so well, being actually deposited on the other side, but in a gradual fashion. Oddly enough, the cob, with one or two pawings of his forefeet, got on to the road again, and the trap righted itself; while a farm-

lad who had been coming along ran to the beast's head and held him. As it turned out, there was no harm done at all.

But that, at first, was apparently not Kate Menzies's impression.

"Ronald, Ronald," she cried, and she clung to him frantically, "I'm dying—I'm dying—kiss me!"

He had got a grip of her, and was getting her on to her feet again.

"There's nothing the matter wi' ye, woman," he said, with unnecessary roughness.

"Ronald, Ronald—I'm hurt—I'm dying—kiss me!" she cried, and she would have fallen away from him, but that he gathered her up, and set her upright on the road.

"There's nothing the matter wi' ye—what? tumbling into a hawthorn hedge?—pull yourself together, woman! It's old mother Paterson that may have been hurt."

He left her unceremoniously to get over to the other side of the edge, and as he went off she darted a look of anger—of violent rage, even—towards him, which happily he did not see. Moreover, she had to calm herself; the farm lad was looking on. And when at length mother Paterson—who was merely terrified, and was quite uninjured—was hoisted over or through the hedge, and they all prepared to resume their seats in the trap, Kate Menzies was apparently quite collected and mistress of herself, though her face was somewhat pale, and her manner was distinctly reserved and cold. She gave the lad a couple of shillings; got up and took the reins; waited until the others were seated, and then drove away without a word. Mother Paterson was loud in her thankfulness over such a providential escape; she had only had her wrists scratched slightly.

Ronald was sensible of her silence, though he could not well guess the cause of it. Perhaps the fright had sobered down her high spirits; at all events, she was now more circumspect with her driving; and, as her attention was so much devoted to the cob, it was not for him to interfere. As they drew near Glasgow, however, she relaxed the cold severity of her manner, and made a few observations; and when they came in sight of St. Rollox, she even con-

descended to ask him whether he would not go on with them to the tavern and have some supper with them as usual.

"I ought to go back to my work," said he, "and that's the truth. But it would be a glum ending for such an unusual holiday as this."

"Your prospects are not so very certain," said Kate, who could talk excellent English when she chose, and kept her broad Scotch for familiar or affectionate intercourse. "An hour or two one way or the other is not likely to make much difference."

"I am beginning to think that myself," he said, rather gloomily.

And then, with a touch of remorse for the depressing speech she had made, she tried to cheer him a little; and, in fact, insisted on his going on with them. She even quoted a couplet from his own song to him—

> *"An hour or twa 'twill do nae harm,*
> *The dints o' fortune to forget;"*

and she said that, after the long drive, he ought to have a famous appetite for supper, and that there would be a good story to tell about their being shot into a hawthorn hedge, supposing that the skipper and Laidlaw and Jaap came in in the evening.

Nevertheless, all during the evening there was a certain restraint in her manner. Altogether gone was her profuse friendship and her pride in East Lothian, although she remained as hospitable as ever. Sometimes she regarded him sharply, as if trying to make out something. On his part, he thought she was probably a little tired after the fatigues of the day; perhaps, also, he preferred her quieter manner.

Then again, when the "*drei Gesellen*" came in, there was a little less hilarity than usual; and, contrary to her wont, she did not press them to stay when they proposed to adjourn to the club. Ronald, who had been vaguely resolving not to go near that haunt for some time to come, found that that was the alternative to his returning to his solitary lodging and his books at a comparatively early hour of the evening. Doubtless he should have conquered

his repugnance to this latter course; but the temptation—after a long day of pleasure-making—to finish up the last hour or so in the society of these good fellows was great. He went to the Harmony Club, and was made more welcome than ever; and somehow, in the excitement of the moment, he was induced to sing another song, and there were more people than ever claiming his acquaintance, and challenging him to have "another one."

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE DOWNWARD WAY.

WITH a fatal certainty he was going from bad to worse; and there was no one to warn him; and if any one had warned him, probably he would not have cared. Life had come to be for him a hopeless and useless thing. His own instinct had answered true, when the American was urging him to go and cast himself into the eager strife of the world, and press forward to the universal goal of wealth and ease and independence. "I'd rather be 'where the dun deer lie,'" he had said. Kingsley's poem had taken firm root in his mind, simply because it found natural soil there.

"Nor I wadna be a clerk, mither, to bide aye ben,
Scrabbling ower the sheets o' parchment with a weary, weary pen;
Looking through the lang stane windows at a narrow strip o' sky,
Like a laverock in a withy cage, until I pine away and die.

* * * * * *

Ye'll bury me 'twixt the brae and the burn, in a glen far away,
Where I may hear the heathcock craw and the great harts bray;
And gin my ghaist can walk, mither, I'll go glowering at the sky,
The livelong night on the black hillsides where the dun deer lie."

His way of existence up there on the far hillsides—unlike that of the luckless outlaw—had been a perfectly happy and contented one. His sound common sense had put away from him that craving for fame which has rendered so miserable the lives of many rustic verse writers; he was proud of his occupation, grateful to the good friends around him, and always in excellent health and spirits. Another

thing has to be said—to pacify the worthy folk who imagine that ambition must necessarily fill the mind of youth: had he come away from that sphere of careless content with a sufficient aim to strive for, perhaps affairs might have gone differently. If it could have been said to him: "Fight your way to the worldly success that the Americans have so liberally prophesied for you; and then come back, and you will find Meenie Douglas awaiting you; and you shall win her and wear her, as the rose and crown of your life, in spite of all the Stuarts of Glengask"—then the little room in Port Dundas Road would no longer have been so gray; and all the future would have been filled with light and hope; and the struggle, however arduous and long, would have been glad enough. But with no such hope; with increasing doubts as to his ultimate success; and with a more dangerously increasing indifference as to whether he should ever reach that success, the temptations of the passing hour became irresistibly strong. And he became feebler to resist them. He did not care. After all, these gay evenings at the Harmony Club were something to look forward to during the long dull days; with a full glass and a good-going pipe and a roaring chorus the hours passed; and then from time to time there was the honour and glory of hearing one of his own songs sung. He was a great figure at these gatherings now; that kind of fame at least had come to him, and come to him unsought; and there were not wanting a sufficiency of rather muddle-headed creatures who declared that he was fit to rank with very distinguished names indeed in the noble roll-call of Scotland's poets; and who, unfortunately, were only too eager to prove the faith that was in them by asking him to drink at their expense.

In this rhyming direction there was one very curious point: when he began to turn over the various pieces that might be made available for Mr. Jaap, he was himself astonished to find how little melody there was in them. Whatever little musical faculty he had seemed to be all locked up in the love-verses he had written about Meenie. Many of the fragments had other qualities—homely common sense; patriotism; a great affection for dumb

animals; here and there sometimes a touch of humour or pathos; but somehow they did not *sing*. It is true that the following piece—

SHOUTHER TO SHOUTHER.

From Hudson's Bay to the Rio Grand',
The Scot is ever a rover;
In New South Wales and in Newfoundland,
And all the wide world over;

Chorus: *But it's shouther to shouther, my bonnie lads,*
And let every Scot be a brither;
And we'll work as we can, and we'll win if we can,
For the sake of our auld Scotch mither.

She's a puir auld wife, wi' little to give;
And she's rather stint o' caressing;
But she's shown us how honest lives we may live,
And she's sent us out wi' her blessing.

Chorus: *And it's shouther to shouther, etc.*

Her land's no rich; and her crops are slim;
And I winna say much for the weather;
But she's given us legs that can gaily clim'
Up the slopes o' the blossoming heather.

Chorus: *And it's shouther to shouther, etc.*

And she's given us hearts that, whatever they say
(And I trow that we might be better)
There's one sair fault they never will hae—
Our mither, we'll never forget her!

Chorus: *And it's shouther to shouther, my bonnie lads,*
And let every Scot be a brither;
And we'll work as we can, and we'll win if we can,
For the sake of our auld Scotch mither!

had attained a great success at the Harmony Club; but that was merely because Mr. Jaap had managed to write for it an effective air, that could be easily caught up and sung in chorus; in itself there was no simple, natural "lilt" whatever. And then, again, in his epistolary rhymes to friends and acquaintances (alas! that was all over now) there were many obvious qualities, but certainly not the lyrical one. Here, for example, are some verses he had *sent in* former days to a certain Johnnie Pringle, living at

Tongue, who had had his eye on a young lass down Loch Loyal way:

O Johnnie, leave the lass alane;
Her mother has but that one wean;
For a' the others have been ta'en,
As weel ye ken, Johnnie.

'Tis true her bonnie e'en would rive
The heart o' any man alive;
And in the husry she would thrive—*
I grant ye that, Johnnie.

But wad ye tak' awa the lass,
I tell ye what would come to pass,
The mother soon would hae the grass
Boon her auld head, Johnnie.

They've got some gear, and bit o' land
That well would bear another hand;
Come down frae Tongue, and take your stand
By Loyal's side, Johnnie!

Ye'd herd a bit, and work the farm,
And keep the widow-wife frae harm;
And wha would keep ye snug and warm
In winter-time, Johnnie?—

The lass hersel'—that I'll be sworn!
And bonnier creature ne'er was born:
Come down the strath the morrow's morn,
Your best foot first, Johnnie!

Well, there may be wise and friendly counsel in verses such as these; but they do not lend themselves readily to the musician who would adapt them for concert purposes. No; all such lyrical faculty as he possessed had been given in one direction. And yet not for one moment was he tempted to show Mr. Jaap any of those little love-lyrics that he had written about Meenie—those careless verses that seemed to sing themselves, as it were, and that were all about summer mornings, and red and white roses, and the carolling of birds, and the whispering of Clebrig's streams. Meenie's praises to be sung at the Harmony Club!—he could as soon have imagined herself singing there.

One wet and miserable afternoon old Peter Japp was

* "Husry," housewifery.

passing through St. Enoch's Square when, much to his satisfaction, he ran against the big skipper, who had just come out of the railway station.

"Hallo, Captain," said the little old man, "back already?"

"Just up frae Greenock; and precious glad to be ashore again, I can tell ye," said Captain M'Taggart. "That *Mary Jane* 'll be my grave, mark my words; I never get as far south as the Mull o' Galloway without wondering whether I'll ever see Ailsa Craig or the Tail o' the Bank again. Well, here I am this time; and I was gaun doon to hae a glass on the strength o't—to the widow's——"

"We'll gang in some other place," Mr. Japp said. "I want to hae a word wi' ye about that young fellow Strang."

They easily discovered another howf; and soon they were left by themselves in a little compartment, two big tumblers of ale before them.

"Ay, and what's the matter wi' him?" said the skipper.

"I dinna rightly ken," the little old musician said, "but something is. Ye see, I'm feared the lad has no' muckle siller——"

"It's a common complaint, Peter!" the skipper said, with a laugh.

"Ay; but ye see, the maist o' us hae some way o' leevin. That's no the case wi' Ronald. He came to Glasgow, as I understand it, wi' a sma' bit nest-egg; and he's been leevin on that ever since—every penny coming out o' his capital, and never a penny being added. That's enough to make a young fellow anxious."

"Ay?"

"But there's mair than that. He's a proud kind o' chiel. It's just wonderfu' the way that Mrs. Menzies humours him, and pretends this and that so he'll no be at any expense; and when they gang out driving she takes things wi' her—and a lot o' that kind o' way o' working; but a' the same there's sma' expenses that canna be avoided, and deil a bit—she says—will he let her pay. And the sma' things maun be great things to him, if he's eating into *his nest-egg* in that way."

"It's easy getting out o' that difficulty," said the big skipper, who was of a less sympathetic nature than the old musician. "What for does he no stay at hame? He doesna need to gang driving wi' her unless he likes."

"It's no easy getting away from Mrs. Menzies," the old man said shrewdly, "if she has a mind to take ye wi' her. And she hersel' sees that he canna afford to spend money even on little things; and yet she's feared to say anything to him. Man, dinna ye mind when she wanted him to take a room in the house?—what was that but that she meant him to have his board free? But no—the deevil has got some o' the Hielan pride in him; she was just feared to say anything mair about it. And at the club, too, it's no every one he'll drink wi' though there's plenty ready to stand Sam, now that Ronald is kent as a writer o' poetry. Not that but wi' ithers he's ower free—ay, confound him, he's getting the reputation o' a harum-scarum deil—if he takes a liking to a man, he'll gang off wi' him and his neighbours for the time being, and goodness knows when or where they'll stop. A bottle o' whisky in their pocket, and off they'll make; I heard the other week o' him and some o' them finding themselves at daybreak in Helensburgh—naught would do the rascal the night before but that he maun hae a sniff o' the saut sea-air; and off they set, him and them, the lang night through, until the daylight found them staring across to Roseneath and Kempoch Point. He's no in the best o' hands, that's the fact. If he would but marry the widow—"

"What would Jimmy Laidlaw say to that?" the skipper said, with a loud laugh.

"Jimmy Laidlaw? He hasna the ghost o' a chance so long as this young fellow's about. Kate's just daft about him; but he's no inclined that way, I can see—unless hunger should tame him. Weel, M'Taggart, I dinna like to see the lad being led away to the mischief. He's got into ill hands. If it's the want o' a settled way o' leevin that's worrying him, and driving him to gang wild and reckless at times, something should be done. I'm an auld man now; I've seen ower many young fellows like that gang to auld Harry; and I like this lad—I'm no going to stand by and look on without a word."

"Ay, and what would ye hiv me dae, Peter? Take him as a hand on board the *Mary Jane?*"

"Na, na. The lad maun gang on wi' his surveying and that kind o' thing—though he seems less and less to think there'll be any solid outcome frae it. But what think ye o' this? There's Mr. Jackson paying they professionals from week to week; and here's a fellow wi' a finer natural voice than any o' them—if it had but a little training. Well, now, why shouldna Jackson pay the lad for his singing?"

"Not if he can get it for nothing, Peter!"

"But he canna—that's just the thing, man," retorted the other. "It's only when Ronald has had a glass and is in the humour that he'll sing anything. Why shouldna he be engaged like the others? It would be a stand-by. It would take up none o' his time. And it might make him a wee thing steadier if he kent he had to sing every night."

"Very well, then, ask Tom Jackson about it," the big skipper said. "Ye may say it would please the members—I'll back ye up with that. Confound him, I dinna ken the deevil had got his leg over the trace."

The old man answered with a cautious smile:

"Ye're rough and ready, "M'Taggart; but that'll no do. Ronald's a camstrairy chiel. There's Hielan blood in his veins; and ye never ken when his pride is gaun to bleeze oot and be up the lum wi'm in a fluff."

"Beggars canna be choosers, my good freen——"

"Beggars? They Hielan folk are never beggars? they'll rob and plunder ye, and fling ye ower a hedge, and rifle your pockets, but deil a bit o' them 'll beg. Na, na; we'll have to contrive some roundabout way to see how he'll take it. But I'll speak to Jackson; and we'll contrive something, I doubtna. Sae finish up your beer, Captain; and if ye're gaun doon to see Mrs. Menzies, I'll gang as far wi' ye; I havena been there this nicht or twa."

Now that was an amiable and benevolent, but, as it turned out, most unfortunate design. That same night Ronald did show up at the Harmony Club; and there was a little more than usual of hilarity and good fellowship over the return of the skipper from the perils of the *deep.* Laidlaw was there too; and he also had been

acquainted with the way in which they meant to approach Ronald, to see whether he could not be induced to sing regularly at these musical meetings for a stipulated payment.

Their first difficulty was to get him to sing at all ; and for a long time he was good-humouredly obdurate, and they let him alone. But later on in the evening one of his own songs was sung—"The fisher lads are bound for hame"—and was received with immense applause, which naturally pleased him ; and then there was a good deal of talking and laughing and conviviality ; in the midst of which the skipper called to him—

"Now, Ronald lad, tune up ; I havena heard a song frae ye this three weeks and mair ; man, if I had a voice like yours wouldna I give them—

"'*The boat rocks at the pier o' Leith,*
Fu' loud the wind blaws frae the ferry ;
The ship rides by the Berwick Law,
And I maun leave my bonnie Mary !'"

And indeed he did, in this loud and general hum, sing these lines, in tones resembling the sharpening of a rusty saw.

"Very well, then," Ronald said. "But I'll sing it where I am—once there's quietness. I'm not going up on that platform."

Of course, the chairman was glad enough to make the announcement, for Ronald's singing was highly appreciated by the members ; moreover there was a little experiment to be tried. So peace was restored ; the accompanist struck a few notes ; and Ronald, with a little indecision at first, but afterwards with a clear-ringing courage, sang that gayest of all parting songs. In the hubbub of applause that followed none but the conspirators saw what now took place. The chairman called a waiter, and spoke a few words to him in an undertone ; the waiter went over to the table where Ronald was sitting and handed him a small package ; and then Ronald, naturally thinking that this was merely a written message or something of the kind, opened the folded piece of white paper.

There was a message, it is true,—"with T. Jackson's

compliments,"—and there was also a sovereign and a shilling. For an instant Ronald regarded this thing with a kind of bewilderment; and then his eyes blazed; the money was dashed on to the ground; and, without a word or a look to any one in the place, he had clapped on his hat and stalked to the door, his mouth firm shut, his lips pale. This glass door was a private door leading to an outer passage formerly described; the handle seemed stiff or awkward: so by main force he drove it before him, and the door swinging back into the lobby, smashed its glass panels against the wall. The "breenge"—for there is no other word—caused by this violent departure was tremendous; and the three conspirators could only sit and look at each other.

"The fat's in the fire now," said the skipper.

"I wonder if the guinea 'll pay for the broken glass," said Jimmy Laidlaw.

But it was the little old musician, whose scheme this had been, who was most concerned.

"We'll have to get hold o' the lad and pacify him," said he. "The Hielan deevil! But if he doesna come back here, he'll get among a worse lot than we are—we'll have to get hold o' him, Captain, and bring him to his senses."

Well, in the end—after a day or two—Ronald was pacified; and he did go back to the club, and resumed his relations with the friends and acquaintances he had formed there. And that was how it came about that Meenie's married sister—who happened to know certain members of the Rev. Andrew Strang's congregation, and who was very curious to discover why it was that Meenie betrayed such a singular interest in this mere gamekeeper, and was repeatedly referring to him in her correspondence—added this postscript to a letter which she was sending to Inver-Mudal:

"I don't know whether it may interest you to hear that Ronald Strang, Mr. Strang's brother, whom you have several times asked about, is *drinking himself to death*, and that in the lowest of low company."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A MESSAGE.

CLEAR and brilliant in their blue and white are these shining northern skies; and the winds that come blowing over the moorland are honey-scented from the heather; and the wide waters of the loch are all of a ruffled and shimmering silver, with a thin fringe of foam along the curving bays. And this is Love Meenie that comes out from the cottage and comes down to the road; with perhaps less of the wild-rose tint in her cheeks than used to be there, and less of the ready light of gladness that used to leap into her blue-gray eyes; but still with that constant gentleness of expression that seems to bring her into accord with all the beautiful things in the landscape around her. And, indeed, on this particular morning she is cheerful enough; walking briskly, chatting to the ancient terrier that is trotting at her side, and equably regarding now the velvet-soft shadows that steal along the sunlit slopes of Clebrig, and now the wheeling and circling of some peewits that have been startled from their marshy haunts by the side of the stream.

"And who knows but that there may be a message or a bit of news for us this morning?" she says to the faithful Harry. "For yonder comes the mail. And indeed it's well for you, my good little chap, that you can't understand how far away Glasgow is; I suppose you expect to see your master at any minute, at every turn of the road. And if he should send you a message—or Maggie either—how am I to tell you?"

The pretty Nelly is at the door of the inn, scattering food to the fowls.

"It's a peautiful moarning, Miss Douglas," she says.

And here is Mr. Murray, with his pipe, and his occultly humorous air.

"And are you come along for your letters, Miss Meenie?" he says. "Ay, ay, it is not an unusual thing for a young leddy to be anxious about a letter—it is not an unusual thing at ahl."

And now the mail-car comes swinging up to the door;

the one or two passengers alight, glad to stretch their legs; the letter bags are hauled down, and Miss Douglas follows them indoors. Mrs. Murray, who acts as post-mistress, is not long in sorting out the contents.

"Two for me?" says Meenie. "And both from Glasgow? Well, now, that does not often happen."

But of course she could not further interrupt the post-mistress in the performance of her duties; so she put the letters in her pocket; passed out from the inn and through the little crowd of loiterers; and made for the high-road and for home. She was in no hurry to open these budgets of news. Such things came but once in a while to this remote hamlet; and when they did come they were leisurely and thoroughly perused—not skimmed and thrown aside. Nevertheless when she got up to the high-road she thought she would pause there for just a second, and run her eye over the pages, lest there might be some mention of Ronald's name. She had heard of him but little of late; and he had never once written to her—perhaps he had no excuse for doing so. It was through Maggie that from time to time she got news of him; and now it was Maggie's letter that she opened first.

Well, there was not much about Ronald. Maggie was at school; Ronald was busy; he seldom came over to the minister's house. And so Meenie, with a bit of a sigh, put that letter into her pocket, and turned to the other. But now she was indifferent and careless. It was not likely that her sister had anything to say about Ronald; for he had not yet called at the house. Moreover, Mrs. Gemmill, from two or three expressions she had used, did not seem anxious to make his acquaintance.

And then the girl's breath caught, and she became suddenly pale. "*Drinking himself to death, in the lowest of low company*"—these were the words confronting her startled eyes; and the next instant she had darted a glance along the road, and another back towards the inn, as if with a sudden strange fear that some one had overseen. No, she was all alone; with the quickly closed letter in her trembling hand; her brain bewildered; her heart beating; and with a kind of terror on her face. And then, rather *blindly*, she turned and walked away in the other direction

—not towards her own home; and still held the letter tightly clasped, as if she feared that some one might get at this ghastly secret.

"*Ronald!—Ronald!*"—there was a cry of anguish in her heart; for this was all too sharp and sudden an end to certain wistful dreams and fancies. These were the dreams and fancies of long wakeful nights, when she would lie and wonder what was the meaning of his farewell look towards her; and wonder if he could guess that his going away was to change all her life for her; and wonder whether, if all things were to go well with him, he would come back and claim her love—that was there awaiting him, and would always await him, whether he ever came back or no. And sometimes, indeed, the morning light brought a joyous assurance with it; she knew well why he had not ventured to hand her that tell-tale message that he had actually written out and addressed to her; but in the glad future, when he could come with greater confidence and declare the truth—would she allow father or mother, or any one else to interfere? On these mornings the Mudal-Water seemed to laugh as it went rippling by; it had a friendly sound; she could hear it

Move the sweet forget-me-nots
That grow for happy lovers."

And at such times her favourite and secret reading was of women who had been bold and generous with their love; and she feared she had been timid and had fallen in too easily with her mother's schemes for her; but now that she understood herself better—now that her heart had revealed itself plainly to her—surely, if ever that glad time were to come—if ever she were to see him hasten along to the little garden-gate—on the very first moment of his arrival—she would not stint her welcome of him? White, white were the mornings on which such fancies filled her head; and the Mudal laughed along its clear brown shadows; and there was a kind of music in the moorland air.

"*Drinking himself to death, in the lowest of low company:*" black night seemed to have fallen upon her, and a wild bewilderment, and a crushing sense of hopelessness that shut out for ever those fair visions of the future. She did

not stay to ask whether this might not be a woman's exaggeration or the mere gossip of a straitlaced set; the blow had fallen too suddenly to let her reason about it; she only knew that the very pride of her life, the secret hope of her heart, had been in a moment extinguished. And Ronald—Ronald that was ever the smartest and handsomest of them all—the gayest and most audacious, the very king of all the company whithersoever he went—was it this same Ronald who had in so short a time become a bleared and besotted drunkard, shunning the public ways, hiding in ignoble haunts, with the basest of creatures for his only friends? And she—that had been so proud of him—that had been so assured of his future,—nay, that had given him the love of her life, and had sworn to herself that, whether he ever came to claim it or no, no other man should take his place in her heart—she it was who had become possessed of this dreadful secret, while all the others were still imagining that Ronald was as the Ronald of yore. She dared not go back to Inver-Mudal—not yet, at least. She went away along the highway; and then left that for a path that led alongside a small burn; and by and by, when she came to a place where she was screened from all observation by steep and wooded banks, she sat down there with some kind of vague notion that she ought more carefully to read this terrible news; but presently she had flung herself, face downward, on the heather, in an utter agony of grief, and there she lay and sobbed and cried, with her head buried in her hands. "*Ronald! Ronald!*" her heart seemed to call aloud in its despair; but how was any appeal to be carried to him—away to Glasgow town? And was this the end? Was he never coming back? The proud young life that promised so fair to be sucked under and whirled away in a black current; and as for her—for her the memory of a few happy days spent on Mudal's banks, and years and years of lonely thinking over what might have been.

A sharp whistle startled her; and she sprang to her feet, and hastily dried her eyes. A Gordon setter came ranging through the strip of birch-wood, and then its companion; both dogs merely glanced at her—they were far too intent on their immediate work to take further notice. And then it quickly occurred to her that, if this were Lord Ailine

who was coming along, perhaps she might appeal to him —she might beg of him to write to Ronald—or even to go to Glasgow—for had not these two been companions and friends? And he was a man—he would know what to do—what could she do, a helpless girl? Presently Lord Ailine appeared, coming leisurely along the banks of the little stream in company with a keeper and a young lad; and when he saw her, he raised his cap and greeted her.

"Don't let us disturb you, Miss Douglas," said he. "Gathering flowers for the dinner-table, I suppose?"

"I hope I have done no harm," said she, though her mind was so agitated that she scarcely knew what she said. "I—I have not seen any birds—nor a hare either."

"Harm? No, no," he said good-naturedly. "I hope your mamma is quite well. There's a haunch of a roe-buck at the lodge that Duncan can take along this afternoon——"

"Your lordship," said the keeper reprovingly, "there's Bella drawing on to something."

"Good morning, Miss Douglas," he said quickly, and the next moment he was off.

But even during that brief interview she had instinctively arrived at the conclusion that it was not for her to spread about this bruit in Inver-Mudal. She could not. This news about Ronald to come from her lips—with perhaps this or that keeper to carry it on to the inn and make it the topic of general wonder there? They would hear of it soon enough. But no one—not even any one in her own household—would be able to guess what it meant to her; as yet she herself could hardly realise it, except that all of a sudden her life seemed to have grown dark.

She had to get back to the cottage in time for the mid-day dinner, and she sate at table there, pale and silent, and with a consciousness as of guilt weighing upon her. She even did her best to eat something, in order to avoid their remarks and looks; but she failed in that, and was glad to get away as soon as she could to the privacy of her own room.

"I'm sure I don't know what's the matter with Williamina," Mrs. Douglas said with a sigh. "She has not been

looking herself for many a day back; and she seems going from bad to worse—she ate hardly a scrap at dinner."

Of course it was for the Doctor to prescribe.

"She wants a change," he said.

"A change," the little dame retorted with some asperity, for this was a sore subject with her. "She would have had a change long before now, but for her and you together. Three months ago I wanted her sent to Glasgow——"

"Glasgow—for any one in indifferent health—" the big bland Doctor managed to interpolate; but she would not listen.

"I'm sure I don't understand the girl. She has no proper pride. Any other girl in her position would be glad to have such chances, and eager to make use of them. But no—she would sooner go looking after a lot of cottar's children than set to work to qualify herself for taking her proper place in society; and what is the use of my talking when you encourage her in her idleness?"

"I like to have the girl at home," he said, rather feebly.

"There," she said, producing a letter and opening it—although he had heard the contents a dozen times before. "There it is—in black and white—a distinct invitation. 'Could you let Meenie come to us for a month or six weeks when we go to Brighton in November?'"

"Well, said the good-natured Doctor, "that would be a better kind of a change. Sea-air—sunlight—plenty of society and amusement."

"She shall not go there, nor anywhere else, with my cousin and his family, until she has fitted herself for taking such a position," said the little woman peremptorily. "Sir Alexander is good-nature itself, but I am not going to send him a half-educated Highland girl that he would be ashamed of. Why, the best families in England go to Brighton for the winter—every one is there. It would be worse than sending her to London. And what does this month or six weeks mean?—Surely it is plain enough. They want to try her. They want to see what her accomplishments are. They want to see whether they can take her abroad with them, and present her at Paris and Florence and Rome. *Every* year now Sir Alexander goes abroad at Christmas

time; and of course if she satisfied them she would be asked to go also—and there, think of that chance!"

"The girl is well enough," said he.

She was on the point of retorting that, as far as he knew anything about the matter, Williamina was well enough. But she spared him.

"No, she has no proper pride," the little Dresden-china woman continued. "And just now, when everything is in her favour. Agatha never had such chances. Agatha never had Williamina's good looks. Of course, I say nothing against Mr. Gemmill—he is a highly respectable man—and if the business is going on as they say it is going, I don't see why they should not leave Queen's Crescent and take a larger house—up by the West End Park. And he is an intelligent man, too; the society they have is clever and intellectual—you saw in Agatha's last letter about the artists' party she had—why, their names are in every newspaper—quite distinguished people, in that way of life. And, at all events, it would be a beginning. Williamina would learn something. Agatha is a perfect musician—you can't deny that."

But here the big Doctor rebelled; and he brought the weight of his professional authority to bear upon her.

"Now, look here, Jane, when I said that the girl wanted a change, I meant a change; but not a change to singing-lessons, and music-lessons, and German lessons, and Italian lessons, and not a change to an atmosphere like that of Glasgow. Bless my soul, do you think *that* kind of change will bring back the colour to her cheek, and give her an appetite, and put some kind of cheerfulness into her? Queen's Crescent! She's not going to Queen's Crescent with my will. Brighton, if you like."

"Brighton? To get herself laughed at, and put in the background, as a half-educated ignorant Highland peasant girl? So long as she is what she is, she shall not go to Brighton with my will."

So here was an absolute dead-lock so far as Meenie's future was concerned; but she knew nothing of it; and if she had known she would not have heeded much. It was not of her own future she was thinking. And it seemed so terrible to her to know that there was nothing she would

not have adventured to save this man from destruction, and to know that she was incapable of doing anything at all. If she could but see him for a moment—to make an appeal to him; if she could but take his hand in hers; would she not say that there had been timidity, doubt, misapprehension in the past, but that now there was no time for any of these; sho had come to claim him and save him and restore him to himself—no matter what he might think of her? Indeed she tried to put all thought of herself out of the matter. She would allow no self-pride to interfere, if only she could be of the smallest aid to him, if she could stretch out her hand to him, and appeal to him, and drag him back. But how? She seemed so helpless. And yet her anxiety drove her to the consideration of a hundred wild and impossible schemes, insomuch that she could not rest in her own room, to which she had retreated for safety and quiet. She put on her bonnet again and went out—still with that guilty consciousness of a secret hanging over her; and she went down the road and over the bridge; and then away up the solitary valley through which the Mudal flows. Alas! there was no laughing over the brown shallows now; there was no thinking of

> *"the sweet forget-me-nots,*
> *That grow for happy lovers;"*

all had become dark around her; and the giant grasp of Glasgow had taken him away from her, and dragged him down, and blotted out for ever the visions of a not impossible future with which she had been wont to beguile the solitary hours. "*Drinking himself to death, in the lowest of low company:*" could this be Ronald, that but a few months ago had been the gayest of any, with audacious talk of what he was going to try for, with health and happiness radiant in his eyes? And it seemed to her that her sister Agatha had been proud of writing these words, and proud of the underlining of them, and that there was a kind of vengeance in them; and the girl's mouth was shut hard; and she was making vague and fierce resolutions of showing to all of them—far and near—that she was not ashamed of her regard for Ronald Strang, gamekeeper or no gamekeeper, if ever the chance should serve.

Ashamed! He had been for her the very king of men—in his generosity, his courage, his gentleness, his manliness, his modesty, and his staunch and unfaltering fealty to his friends. And was he to fall away from that ideal, and to become a wreck, a waif, an outcast; and she to stand by and not stretch out a hand to save?

But what could she do? All the day she pondered; all the evening; and through the long, silent, and wakeful night. And when, at last, as the gray of the dawn showed in the small window, she had selected one of these hundred bewildered plans and schemes, it seemed a fantastic thing that she was about to do. She would send him a piece of white heather. He would know it came from her—he would recognise the postmark, and also her handwriting. And if he took it as a message and an appeal, as a token of good wishes and friendliness, and the hope of better fortune? Or if—and here she fell a-trembling, for it was a little cold in these early hours—if he should take it as a confession, as an unmaidenly declaration? Oh, she did not care. It was all she could think of doing; and do something she must. And she remembered with a timid and nervous joy her own acknowledged influence over him—had not Maggie talked of it a thousand times?—and if he were to recognise this message in its true light, what then? "*Ronald! Ronald!*" her heart was still calling, with something of a tremulous hope amid all its grief and pity.

She was out and abroad over the moorland long before any one was astir, and searching with an anxious diligence, and as yet without success. White heather is not so frequently met with in the North as in the West Highlands; and yet in Sutherlandshire it is not an absolute rarity; many a time had she come across a little tuft of it in her wanderings over the moors. But now, search as she might, she could not find the smallest bit; and time began to press; for this was the morning for the mail to go south—if she missed it, she would have to wait two more days. And as half-hour after half-hour went by, she became more anxious and nervous and agitated; she went rapidly from knoll to knoll, seeking the likeliest places; and all in vain. It was a question of minutes now. She could hear the

mail-cart on the road behind her; soon it would pass her and go on to the inn, where it would remain but a brief while before setting out again for Lairg. And presently, when the mail-cart did come along and go by, then she gave up the quest in despair; and in a kind of bewildered way set out for home. Her heart was heavy and full of its disappointment; and her face was paler a little than usual; but at least her eyes told no tales.

And then, all of a sudden, as she was crossing the Mudal bridge, she caught sight of a little tuft of gray away along the bank and not far from the edge of the stream. At first she thought it was merely a patch of withered heather; and then a wild hope possessed her; she quickly left the bridge and made her way towards it; and the next moment she was joyfully down on her knees, selecting the whitest spray she could find. And the mail-cart?—it would still be at the inn—the inn was little more than half a mile off—could she run hard and intercept them after all, and send her white-dove message away to the south? To think of it was to try it, at all events; and she ran as no town-bred girl ever ran in her life—past the Doctor's cottage, along the wide and empty road, past the keeper's house and the kennels, across the bridge that spans the little burn. Alas! there was the mail-cart already on its way.

"Johnnie, Johnnie!" she called.

Happily the wind was blowing towards him; he heard, looked back, and pulled up his horses.

"Wait a minute—I have a letter for you to take!" she called, though her strength was all gone now.

And yet she managed to get quickly down to the inn, and astonished Mrs. Murray by breathlessly begging for an envelope.

"Tell Nelly—tell Nelly," she said, while her trembling fingers wrote the address, "to come and take this to the mail-cart — they're waiting — Johnnie will post it at Lairg."

And then, when she had finished the tremulous address, and carefully dried it with the blotting-paper, and given the little package to Nelly, and bade her run—quick, quick—to hand it to the driver, then the girl sank back in the chair and began laughing in a strange, half-hysterical way,

and then that became a burst of crying, with her face hidden in her hands. But the good-hearted Mrs. Murray was there; and her arms were round the girl's neck; and she was saying, in her gentle Highland way—

"Well, well, now, to think you should hef had such a run to catch the mail-cart—and no wonder you are dead-beat—ay, ay, and you not looking so well of late, Miss Meenie. But you will just rest here a while; and Nelly will get you some tea; and there is no need for you to go back home until you have come to yourself better. No, you hef not been looking well lately; and you must not tire yourself like this—dear me, the place would be quite different ahltogether if anything was to make you ill."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

IN GLASGOW TOWN.

It was as late as half-past ten o'clock—and on a sufficiently gray and dull and cheerless morning—that Ronald's landlady, surprised not to have heard him stirring, knocked at his room. There was no answer. Then she knocked again, opened the door an inch or two, and dropped a letter on the floor.

"Are ye no up yet?"

The sound of her voice aroused him.

"In a minute, woman," he said sleepily; and, being thus satisfied, the landlady went off, shutting the door behind her.

He rose in the bed and looked around him, in a dazed fashion. He was already partially dressed, for he had been up two hours before, but had thrown himself down on the bed again, over-fatigued, half-stupefied, and altogether discontented. The fact is, he had come home the night before in a reckless mood, and had sate on through hour after hour until it was nearly dawn, harassing himself with idle dreams and idle regrets, drinking to drown care, smoking incessantly, sometimes scrawling half-scornful rhymes. There were all the evidences now on the table before him—a whisky-bottle, a tumbler, a wooden pipe and plenty of ashes, a sheet of paper scrawled over in an un-

certain hand. He took up that sheet to recall what he had written :

King Death came striding along the road,
And he laughed aloud to see
How every rich man's mother's son
Would take to his heels and flee.

Duke, lord, or merchant, off they skipped,
Whenever that he drew near;
And they dropped their guineas as wild they ran,
And their faces were white with fear.

But the poor folk labouring in the fields
Watched him as he passed by;
And they took to their spades and mattocks again,
And turned to their work with a sigh.

Then farther along the road he saw
An old man sitting alone;
His head lay heavy upon his hands,
And sorrowful was his moan.

Old age had shrivelled and bent his frame;
Age and hard work together
Had scattered his locks, and bleared his eyes—
Age and the winter weather.

"Old man," said Death, "do you tremble to know
That now you are near the end?"
The old man looked: "You are Death," said he,
"And at last I've found a friend."

It was a strange kind of mood for a young fellow to have fallen into ; but he did not seem to think so. As he contemplated the scrawled lines—with rather an absent and preoccupied air—this was what he was saying to himself—

"If the old gentleman would only come striding along the Port Dundas Road, I know one that would be glad enough to go out and meet him and shake hands with him, this very minute."

He went to the window and threw it open, and sate down : the outer air would be pleasanter than this inner atmosphere, impregnated with the fumes of whisky and tobacco ; and his head was burning, and his pulses heavy. But the dreariness of this outlook !—the gray pavements, the gray railway station, the gray sheds, the gray skies ; and

evermore the dull slumberous sound of the great city already plunged in its multitudinous daily toil. Then he began to recall the events of the preceding evening; and had not Mrs. Menzies promised to call for him, about eleven, to drive him out to see some of her acquaintances at Milngavie? Well, it would be something to do; it would be a relief to get into the fresher air—to get away from this hopeless and melancholy neighbourhood. Kate Menzies had high spirits; she could laugh away remorse and discontent and depression; she could make the hours go by somehow. And now, as it was almost eleven, he would finish his dressing and be ready to set out when she called; as for breakfast, no thought of that entered his mind.

Then he chanced to see something white lying on the floor—an envelope—perhaps this was a note from Kate, saying she was too busy that morning and could not come for him? He went and took up the letter; and instantly—as he regarded the address on it—a kind of bewilderment, almost of fear, appeared on his face. For well he knew Meenie's handwriting: had he not pondered over every characteristic of it—the precise small neatness of it, the long loops of the *l*'s, the German look of the capital R? And why should Meenie write to him?

He opened the envelope and took out the bit of white heather that Meenie had so hastily despatched: there was no message, not the smallest scrap of writing. But was not this a message—and full of import, too; for surely Meenie would not have adopted this means of communicating with him at the mere instigation of an idle fancy? And why should she have sent it—and at this moment? Had she heard, then? Had any gossip about him reached Inver-Mudal? And how much had she heard? There was a kind of terror in his heart as he went slowly back to the window, and sate down there, still staring absently at this token that had been sent him, and trying hard to make out the meaning of it. What was in Meenie's mind? What was her intention? Not merely to give him a sprig of white heather with wishes for good luck; there was more than that, as he easily guessed; but how much more? And at first there was little of joy or gladness or gratitude

in his thinking; there was rather fear, and a wondering as to what Meenie had heard of him, and a sickening sense of shame. The white gentleness of the message did not strike him; it was rather a reproach—a recalling of other days—Meenie's eyes were regarding him with proud indignation—this was all she had to say to him now.

A man's voice was heard outside; the door was brusquely opened; Jimmy Laidlaw appeared.

"What, man, no ready yet? Are ye just out o' your bed? Where's your breakfast? Dinna ye ken it's eleven o'clock?"

Ronald regarded him with no friendly eye. He wished to be alone; there was much to think of; there was more in his mind than the prospect of a rattling, devil-may-care drive out to Milngavie.

"Is Kate below?" said he.

"She is that. Look sharp, man, and get on your coat. She doesna like to keep the cob standing."

"Look here, Laidlaw," Ronald said, "I wish ye would do me a good turn. Tell her that—that I'll be obliged if she will excuse me; I'm no up to the mark; ye'll have a merrier time of it if ye go by yourselves; there now, like a good fellow, make it straight wi' her."

"Do ye want her to jump doon ma throat?" retorted Mr. Laidlaw, with a laugh. "I'll tak' no sic message. Come, come, man, pull yoursel' thegither. What's the matter? Hammer and tongs in your head?—the fresh air'll drive that away. Come along!"

"The last word's the shortest," Ronald said stubbornly. "I'm not going. Tell her not to take it ill—I'm—I'm obliged to her, tell her——"

"Indeed, I'll leave you and her to fight it out between ye," said Laidlaw. "D'ye think I want the woman to snap my head off?"

He left, and Ronald fondly hoped that they would drive away and leave him to himself. But presently there was a light tapping at the door.

"Ronald!"

He recognised the voice, and he managed to throw a coat over his shoulders—just as Kate Menzies, without *further* ceremony, made her appearance.

"What's this now?" exclaimed the buxom widow—who was as radiant and good-natured and smartly dressed as ever—"what does this daft fellow Laidlaw mean by bringing me a message like that? I ken ye better, Ronald, my lad. Down in the mouth?—take a hair o' the dog that bit ye. Here, see, I'll pour it out for ye."

She went straight to the bottle, uncorked it, and poured out about a third of a tumblerful of whisky.

"Ronald, Ronald, ye're an ill lad to want this in the morning; but what must be, must; here, put some life into ye. The day'll be just splendid outside the town; and old Jaaps with us too; and I've got a hamper; and somewhere or other we'll camp out, like a band of gypsies. Dinna fear, lad; I'll no drag ye into the MacDougals' house until we're on the way back; and then it'll just be a cup o' tea and a look at the bairns, and on we drive again to the town. What's the matter? Come on, my lad!—we'll have a try at 'Cauld Kail in Aberdeen' when we get away frae the houses."

"Katie, lass," said he, rather shamefacedly, "I'm—I'm sorry that I promised—but I'll take it kind of ye to excuse me—I'm no in the humour someway—and ye'll be better by yourselves——"

"Ay, and what good'll ye do by pu'ing a wry mouth?" said she tauntingly. "'The devil was ill, the devil a saint would be.' Here, man! it's no the best medicine, but it's better than none."

She took the whisky to him, and gave him a hearty slap on the shoulder. There was a gleam of sullen fire in his eye.

"It's ill done of ye, woman, to drive a man against his will," he said, and he retreated from her a step or two.

"Oh," said she, proudly, and she threw the whisky into the coal-scuttle, and slammed the tumbler down on the table, for she had a temper too, "if ye'll no be coaxed, there's them that will. If that's what Long John does for your temper, I'd advise you to change and try Talisker. Good morning to ye, my braw lad, and thank ye for your courtesy."

She stalked from the room, and banged the door behind her when she left. But she was really a good-hearted kind

of creature; before she had reached the outer door she had recovered herself; and she turned and came into the room again, a single step or so.

"Ronald," she said, in quite a different voice, "it'll no be for your good to quarrel wi' me——"

"I wish for no quarrel wi' ye, Katie woman——"

"For I look better after ye than some o' them. If ye'll no come for the drive, will ye look in in the afternoon or at night, if it suits ye better? Seven o'clock, say—to show that there's no ill feeling between us."

"Yes, I will," said he—mainly to get rid of her; for, indeed, he could scarcely hear what she was saying to him for thinking of this strange and mysterious message that had come to him from Meenie.

And then, when she had gone, he rapidly washed and dressed, and went away out from the house—out by the Cowcaddens, and Shamrock Street, and West Prince's Street, and over the Kelvin, and up to Hillhead, to certain solitary thoroughfares he had discovered in his devious wanderings; and all the time he was busy with various interpretations of this message from Meenie and of her reasons for sending it. At first, as has been said, there was nothing for him but shame and self-abasement; this was a reproach; she had heard of the condition into which he had fallen; this was to remind him of what had been. And indeed, it was now for the first time that he began to be conscious of what that condition was. He had fled to those boon-companions as a kind of refuge from the hopelessness of the weary hours, from the despair with regard to the future that had settled down over his life. He had laughed, drunk, smoked, and sung the time away, glad to forget. When haunting memories came to rebuke, then there was a call for another glass, another song. Nay, he could even make apologies to himself when the immediate excitement was over. Why should he do otherwise? The dreams conjured up by the Americans had no more charms for him. Why should he work towards some future that had no interest for him?

Death is the end of life; ah, why
Should life all labour be?

And so Kate Menzies's dog-cart became a pleasant thing, as it rattled along the hard stony roads; and many a merry glass they had at the wayside inns; and then home again in the evening to supper, and singing, and a good-night bacchanalian festival at the Harmony Club. The hours passed; he did not wish to think of what his life had become; enough if, for the time being, he could banish the horrors of the aching head, the hot pulse, the trembling hands.

But if Meenie had heard of all this, how would it appear to her? and he made no doubt that she had heard. It was some powerful motive that had prompted her to do this thing. He knew that her sister had been making inquiries about him; his brother's congregation was a hot-bed of gossip; if any news of him had been sent by that agency, no doubt it was the worst. And still Meenie did not turn away from him with a shudder? He took out the envelope again. What could she mean? Might he dare to think it was this—that, no matter what had happened, or what she had heard, she still had some little faith in him, that the recollection of their old friendship was not all gone away? Reproach it might be—but perhaps also an appeal? And if Meenie had still some interest in what happened to him——?

He would go no farther than that. It was characteristic of the man that, even with this white token of goodwill and remembrance and good wishes before his eyes—with this unusual message just sent to him from one who was generally so shy and reserved—he permitted to himself no wildly daring fancies or bewildering hopes. Nor had the majesty of the Stuarts of Glengask and Orosay anything to do with this restraint: it was the respect that he paid to Meenie herself. And yet—and yet this was a friendly token; it seemed to make the day whiter somehow; it was with no ill-will she had been thinking of him when she gathered it from one of the knolls at the foot of Clebrig or from the banks of Mudal-Water. So white and fresh it was; it spoke of clear skies and sweet moorland winds; and there seemed to be the soft touch of her fingers still on it as she had pressed it into the envelope; and it was Meenie's own small white hand that had written that.

rather trembling "*Mr. Ronald Strang.*" A gentle message; he grew to think that there was less of reproach in it; if she had heard evil tidings of him, perhaps she was sorry more than anything else; Meenie's eyes might have sorrow in them and pain, but anger—never. And her heart—well, surely her heart could not have been set bitterly against him, or she would not have sent him this mute little token of remembrance, as if to recall the olden days.

And then he rose and drove against the bars that caged him in. Why should the ghastly farce be played any longer? Why should he go through that dull mechanical routine in which he had no interest whatever? Let others make what money they choose; let others push forward to any future that they might think desirable; let them aim at being first in the world's fight for wealth, and having saloon-carriages, and steam-yachts on Lake Michigan, and cat-boats on Lake George: but as for him, if Lord Ailine, now, would only let him go back to the little hamlet in the northern wilds, and give him charge of the dogs again, and freedom to ask Dr. Douglas to go with him for a turn at the mountain hares or for a day's salmon-fishing on the Mudal—in short, if only he could get back to his old life again, with fair skies over him, and fresh blowing winds around him, and wholesome blood running cheerily through his veins? And then the chance, at some hour or other of the long day, of meeting Meenie, and finding the beautiful, timid, Highland eyes fixed on his: "Are you going along to the inn, Ronald?" he could almost hear her say. "And will you be so kind as to take these letters for me?"

But contracted habits are not so easily shaken off as all that; and he was sick and ill at ease; and when the hour came for him to go down and see Kate Menzies and her friends, perhaps he was not altogether sorry that he had made a definite promise which he was bound to keep. He left the envelope, with its piece of white heather, at home.

Nevertheless, he was rather dull, they thought; and there was some facetious raillery over his not having yet recovered from the frolic of the previous night; with frequent invitations to take a hair of the dog that had bitten him. Kate was the kindest; she had been a little alarmed by the

definite repugnance he had shown in the morning; she was glad to be friends with him again. As for him—well, he was as good-natured as ever; but rather absent in manner; for sometimes, amid all their boisterous *camaraderie*, he absolutely forgot what they were saying; and in a kind of dream he seemed to see before him the sunlit Strath-Terry, and the blue waters of the loch, and Mudal's stream winding through the solitary moorland waste—and a young girl there stooping to pick up something from the heather.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A RESOLVE.

THE days passed; no answer came to that mute message of hers; nay, how could she expect any answer? But these were terrible days to her—of mental torture, and heart-searching, and unceasing and unsatisfied longing, and yearning, and pity. And then out of all this confusion of thinking and suffering there gradually grew up a clear and definite resolve. What if she were to make of that bit of white heather but an *avant-courrier?* What if she were herself to go to Glasgow, and seek him out, and confront him, and take him by the hand? She had not overrated her old influence with him: well she knew that. And how could she stand by idle and allow him to perish? The token she had sent him must have told him of her thinking of him; he would be prepared; perhaps he would even guess that she had come to Glasgow for his sake? Well, she did not mind that much; Ronald would have gentle thoughts of her, whatever happened; and this need was far too sore and pressing to permit of timid and sensitive hesitations.

One morning she went to her father's room and tapped at the door.

"Come in!"

She was rather pale as she entered.

"Father," she said, "I would like to go to Glasgow for a while."

Her father turned in his chair and regarded her.

"What's the matter with ye, my girl?" he said. "You've not been looking yourself at all for some time back, and these last few days you've practically eaten nothing. And yet your mother declares there's nothing the matter. Glasgow? I dare say a change would do you good—cheer you up a bit, and that; but—Glasgow? More schooling, more fees, that would be the chief result, I imagine; and that's what your mother's driving at. I think it's nonsense: you're a grown woman; you've learned everything that will ever be of any use to you."

"I ought to have, any way, by this time," Meenie said simply. "And indeed it is not for that, father. I—I should like to go to Glasgow for a while."

"There's Lady Stuart would have ye stay with them at Brighton for a few weeks; but your mother seems to think you should go amongst them as a kind of Mezzofanti—it's precious little of that there's about Sir Alexander, as I know well. However, if you're not to go to them until you are polished out of all human shape and likeness, I suppose I must say nothing——"

"But I would rather go and stay with Agatha, father," the girl said.

He looked at her again.

"Well," said he, "I do think something must be done. It would be a fine thing for you—you of all creatures in the world—to sink into a hopeless anæmic condition. Lassie, where's that eldritch laugh o' yours gone to? And I see you go dawdling along the road—you that could beat a young roedeer if you were to try. Glasgow?—well, I'll see what your mother says."

"Thank you, father," she said, but she did not leave at once. "I think I heard you say that Mr. Blair was going south on Monday," she timidly suggested.

This Mr. Blair was a U.P. minister from Glasgow, who was taking a well-earned holiday up at Tongue—fishing in the various lochs in that neighbourhood—and who was known to the Douglases.

"You're in a deuce of a hurry, Miss," her father said, but good-naturedly enough. "You mean you could go to Glasgow under his escort?"

"Yes."

"Well, I will see what your mother says—I suppose she will be for making a fuss over the necessary preparations."

But this promise and half permission had instantly brought to the girl a kind of frail and wandering joy and hope; and there was a brief smile on her face as she said—

"Well, you know, father, if I have to get any things I ought to get them in Glasgow. The preparations at Inver-Mudal can't take much time."

"I will see what your mother thinks about it," said the big, good-humoured Doctor, who was cautious about assenting to anything until the ruler and lawgiver of the house had been consulted.

The time was short, but the chance of sending Meenie to Glasgow under charge of the Rev. Mr. Blair was opportune; and Mrs. Douglas had no scruple about making use of this temporary concern on the part of her husband about Meenie's health for the working out of her own ends. Of course the girl was only going away to be brightened up by a little society. The change of air might possibly do her good. There could be no doubt she had been looking ill; and in her sister's house she would have every attention paid her, quite as much as if she were in her own home. All the same, Mrs. Douglas was resolved that this opportunity for finally fitting Meenie for that sphere in which she hoped to see her move should not be lost. Agatha should have private instructions. And Agatha herself was a skilled musician. Moreover, some little society—of a kind—met at Mr. Gemmill's house; the time would not be entirely lost, even if a little economy in the matter of fees was practised, in deference to the prejudices and dense obtuseness of one who ought to have seen more clearly his duty in this matter—that is to say, of Meenie's father.

And so it was that, when the Monday morning came round, Meenie had said good-bye to every one she knew, and was ready to set out for the south. Not that she was going by the mail. Oh no, Mr. Murray would not hear of that, nor yet of her being sent in her father's little trap. No; Mr. Murray placed his own large wag-

gonette and a pair of horses at her disposal; and when the mail-cart came along from Tongue, Mr. Blair's luggage was quickly transferred to the more stately vehicle, and immediately they started. She did not look like a girl going away for a holiday. She was pale rather, and silent; and Mr. Blair, who had memories of her as a bright, merry, clear-eyed lass, could not understand why she should be apparently so cast down at the thought of leaving her father's home for a mere month or so. As for old John Murray, he went into the inn, grumbling and discontented.

"It is a strange thing," he said,—for he was grieved and offended at their sending Meenie away, and he knew that Inver-Mudal would be a quite different place with her not there,—"a strange thing indeed to send a young girl away to Glasgow to get back the roses into her cheeks. Ay, will she get them there? A strange thing indeed. And her father a doctor too. It is just a teffie of a piece of nonsense."

The worthy minister, on the other hand, was quite delighted to have so pretty a travelling companion with him on that long journey to the south; and he looked after her with the most anxious paternal solicitude, and from time to time he would try to cheer her with the recital of ancient Highland anecdotes that he had picked up during his fishing excursions. But he could see that the girl was preoccupied; her eyes were absent and her manner distraught; sometimes her colour came and went in a curious way, as if some sudden fancy had sent a tremor to her heart. Then, as they drew near to the great city—it was a pallid-clear morning, with some faint suggestions of blue overhead that gave the wan landscape an almost cheerful look—she was obviously suffering from nervous excitement; her answers to him were inconsequent, though she tried her bravest to keep up the conversation. The good man thought he would not bother her. No doubt it would be a great change—from the quiet of Inver-Mudal to the roar and bustle of the vast city; and no doubt the mere sight of hundreds and hundreds of strangers would in itself be bewildering. Meenie, as he understood, had been in Glasgow before, but it was some years

ago, and she had not had a long experience of it; in any case, she would naturally be restless and nervous in looking forward to such a complete change in her way of life.

As they slowed into the station, moreover, he could not help observing how anxiously and eagerly she kept glancing from stranger to stranger, as they passed them on the platform.

"There will be somebody waiting for you, Miss Meenie?" he said at a venture.

"No, no," she answered, somewhat hurriedly and shamefacedly as he thought—and the good minister was puzzled; "Agatha wrote that Mr. Gemmill would be at the warehouse, and—and she would be busy in the house on a Monday morning, and I was just to take a cab and come on to Queen's Crescent. Oh! I shall manage all right," she added, with some bravado.

And yet, when they had seen to their luggage, and got along to the platform outside the station, she seemed too bewildered to heed what was going on. Mr. Blair called a cab and got her boxes put on the top; but she was standing there by herself, looking up and down, and regarding the windows of the houses opposite in a kind of furtive and half-frightened way.

"This is Port Dundas Road?" she said to the minister (for had not Maggie, in her voluminous communications about Ronald, described the exact locality of his lodging, and the appearance of the station from his room?)

"It is."

She hesitated for a second or two longer; and then, recalling herself with an effort, she thanked the minister for all his kindness, and bade him good-bye, and got into the cab. Of course she kept both windows down, so that she could command a view of both sides of the thoroughfares as the man drove her away along the Cowcaddens and the New City Road. But alas! how was she ever to find Ronald—by accident, as she had hoped—in that continuous crowd? She had pictured to herself her suddenly meeting him face to face; and she would read in his eyes how much he remembered of Inver-Mudal and the olden days. But among this multitude, how was such a thing

possible? And then it was so necessary that this meeting should be observed by no third person.

However, these anxious doubts and fears were forcibly driven from her head by her arrival at Queen's Crescent, and the necessity of meeting the emergencies of the moment. She had but a half recollection of this secluded little nook, with its semicircle of plain, neat, well-kept houses, looking so entirely quiet and respectable; and its pretty little garden, with its grass-plots, and its flower-plots, and its trim walks and fountain—all so nice and neat and trim, and at this minute looking quite cheerful in the pallid sunshine. And here, awaiting her at the just opened door, was her sister Agatha—a sonsy, sufficiently good-looking young matron, who had inherited her buxom proportions from her father, but had got her Highland eyes, which were like Meenie's, from her mother. And also there were a smaller Agatha—a self-important little maiden of ten—and two younger children; and as the advent of this pretty young aunt from Sutherlandshire was of great interest to them, there was a babble of inquiries and answers as they escorted her into the house.

"And such a surprise to hear you were coming," her sister was saying. "We little expected it—but ye're none the less welcome—and Walter's just quite set up about it. Ay, and ye're not looking so well, my father says?—let's see."

She took her by the shoulders and wheeled her to the light. But, of course, the girl was flushed with the excitement of her arrival, and pleased with the attentions of the little people, so that for the moment the expression of her face was bright enough.

"There's not much wrong," said the sister, "but I don't wonder at your being dull in yon dreadful hole. And I suppose there's no chance of moving now. If my father had only kept to Edinburgh or Glasgow, and got on like anybody else, we might all have been together, and among friends and acquaintances; but it was aye the same—give him the chance of a place where there was a gun or a fishing-rod handy, and that was enough. Well, well, Meenie, we must wake ye up a bit if you've been feeling dull; and Walter—he's as proud as a peacock that you're

come; I declare it's enough to make any other woman than myself jealous, the way he shows your portrait to anybody and everybody that comes to the house; and I had a hint from him this morning that any bit things ye might need—mother's letter only came on Saturday—that they were to be a present from him, and there's nothing stingy about Wat, though I say it who shouldn't. And you'll have to share Aggie's bed for a night or two until we have a room got ready for you."

"If I had only known that I was going to put you about, Agatha——"

"Put us about, you daft lassie!" the elder sister exclaimed. "Come away, and I'll show you where your things will have to be stored for the present. And my father says there are to be no finishing lessons, or anything of that kind, for a while yet; you're to walk about and amuse yourself; and we've a family-ticket for the Botanic Gardens—you can take a book there or some knitting; and then you'll have to help me in the house, for Walter will be for showing you off as his Highland sister-in-law, and we'll have plenty of company."

And so the good woman rattled on; and how abundantly and secretly glad was Meenie that not a word was said of Ronald Strang! She had felt guilty enough when she entered the house; she had come on a secret errand that she dared not disclose; and one or two things in her sister's letters had convinced her that there were not likely to be very friendly feelings towards Ronald in this little domestic circle. But when they had gone over almost every conceivable topic, and not a single question had been asked about Ronald, nor any reference even made to him, she felt immensely relieved. To them, then, he was clearly of no importance. Probably they had forgotten that she had once or twice asked if he had called on them. Or perhaps her sister had taken it for granted that the piece of news she had sent concerning him would effectually and for ever crush any interest in him that Meenie may have felt. Anyhow, his name was not even mentioned; and that was so far well.

But what a strange sensation was this—when in the afternoon she went out for a stroll with the smaller Agatha

—to feel that at any moment, at the turning of any corner, she might suddenly encounter Ronald. That ever-moving crowd had the profoundest interest for her; these rather grimy streets a continuous and mysterious fascination. Of course the little Agatha, when they went forth from the house, was for going up to the West End Park or out by Hillhead to the Botanic Gardens, so that the pretty young aunt should have a view of the beauties of Glasgow. But Meenie had no difficulty in explaining that green slopes and trees and things of that kind had no novelty for her, whereas crowded streets and shops and the roar of cabs and carriages had; and so they turned city-wards when they left the house, and went away in by Cambridge Street and Sauchiehall Street to Buchanan Street. And was this the way, then, she asked herself (and she was rather an absent companion for her little niece), that Ronald would take on leaving his lodgings to get over to the south side of the city, where, as she understood from his sister's letters, lived the old forester who was superintending his studies? But there were so many people here!—and all seemingly strangers to each other; scarcely any two or three of them stopping to have a chat together; and all of them apparently in such a hurry. Argyll Street was even worse; indeed, she recoiled from that tumultuous thoroughfare; and the two of them turned north again. The lamplighter was beginning his rounds; here and there an orange star gleamed in the pallid atmosphere; here and there a shop window glowed yellow. When they got back to Queen's Crescent they found that Mr. Gemmill had returned; it was his tea-time; and there was a talk of the theatre for the older folk.

Well, she did not despair yet. For one thing, she had not been anxious to meet Ronald during that first plunge into the great city, for Agatha was with her. But that was merely because the little girl had obtained a holiday in honour of her aunt's coming; thereafter she went to school every morning; moreover, the household happened to be a maidservant short, and Mrs. Gemmill was busy, so that Meenie was left to do pretty much as she liked, and to go about alone. And her walks did not take her much to the Botanic Gardens, nor yet to the West End Park and Kelvin

Grove; far rather she preferred to go errands for her sister, and often these would take her in by Sauchiehall Street and the top of Buchanan Street; and always her eyes were anxious and yet timorous, seeking and yet half-fearing to find. But where was Ronald? She tried different hours. She grew to know every possible approach to that lodging in the Port Dundas Road. And she had schooled herself now so that she could search long thoroughfares with a glance that was apparently careless enough; and she had so often pictured to herself their meeting, that she knew she would not exhibit too great a surprise nor make too open a confession of her joy.

And at last her patient waiting was rewarded. It was in Renfield Street that she suddenly caught sight of him—a long way off he was, but coming towards her, and all unconscious of her being there. For a moment her schooling of herself gave way somewhat; for her heart was beating so wildly as almost to choke her; and she went on with her eyes fixed on the ground, wondering what she should say, wondering if he would find her face grown paler than it used to be, wondering what he would think of her having sent him the bit of white heather. And then she forced herself to raise her eyes; and it was at the very same instant that he caught sight of her—though he was yet some distance off—and for the briefest moment she saw his strange and startled look. But what was this? Perhaps he fancied she had not seen him; perhaps he had reasons for not wishing to be seen; at all events, after that one swift recognition of her, he had suddenly slunk away—down some lane or other—and when she went forward, in rather a blind and bewildered fashion, behold! there was no Ronald there at all. She looked around—with a heart as if turned to stone—but there was no trace of him. And then she went on, rather proudly—or perhaps, rather, trying to feel proud and hurt; but there was a gathering mist coming into her eyes; and she scarcely knew—nor cared—whither she was walking.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A BOLDER STEP.

As for him, he slunk aside hurriedly and all abashed and dismayed. He did not pause until he was safe away from any pursuit; and there was a lowering expression on his face, and his hand shook a little. He could only hope that she had not seen him. Instantly he had seen her, he knew that he dared not meet the beautiful clear eyes, that would regard him, and perhaps mutely ask questions of him, even if there was no indignant reproach in them. For during these past few days he had gradually been becoming conscious of the squalor and degradation into which he had sunk; and sometimes he would strive to raise himself out of that; and sometimes he would sink back despairing, careless of what might become of him or his poor affairs. But always there was there in his room that mystic white token that Meenie had sent him; and at least it kept him thinking—his conscience was not allowed to slumber; and sometimes it became so strong an appeal to him—that is to say, he read into the message such wild and daring and fantastic possibilities—that he would once more resume that terrible struggle with the iron bands of habit that bound him.

"What is the matter wi' Ronald?" Kate Menzies asked of her cronies. "He hasna been near the house these three or four days."

"I'm thinking he's trying to earn the Blue Ribbon," said old Mr. Jaap.

"And no thriving weel on't, poor lad," said Jimmy Laidlaw. "Down in the mouth's no the word. He's just like the ghost o' himsel'."

"I tell ye what, Mistress," said the big skipper, who was contemplating with much satisfaction a large beaker of hot rum and water, "the best thing you could do would be just to take the lad in hand, and marry him right off. He would have somebody to look after him, and so would you; as handsome a couple as ever stepped along Jamaica Street, I'll take my oath."

The buxom widow laughed and blushed; but she was bound to protest.

"Na, na, Captain, I ken better than that. I'm no going to throw away a business like this on any man. I'll bide my ain mistress for a while longer, if ye please."

And then mother Paterson—who had a handy gift of facile acquiescence—struck in—

"That's right, Katie dear! Ye're sich a wise woman. To think ye'd throw away a splendid place like this, and a splendid business, on any man, and make him maister! And how long would it be before he ate and drank ye out o' house and ha'?—set him up with a handsome wife and a splendid business thrown at his heed, and scarcely for the asking! Na, na, Katie, woman, ye ken your own affairs better than that; ye're no for any one to come in and be maister here."

"But I'm concerned about the lad," said Kate Menzies, a little absently. "He met wi' none but friends here. He might fa' into worse hands."

"Gang up yersel', Mistress, and hae a talk wi' him," said the skipper boldly.

Kate Menzies did not do that; but the same evening she wrote Ronald a brief note. And very well she could write too—in a dashing, free handwriting; and gilt-edged was the paper, and rose-pink was the envelope.

"DEAR RONALD—Surely there is no quarrel between us. If I have offended you, come and tell me; don't go away and sulk. If I have done or said anything to offend you, I will ask your pardon. Can I do anything more than that? Your cousin and friend,

"KATE MENZIES."

Of course he had to answer such an appeal in person; he went down the next morning.

"Quarrel, woman? What put that into your head? If there had been anything of that kind, I would have told you fast enough; I'm not one of the sulking kind."

"Well, I'm very glad to ken we're just as good friends as before," said Kate, regarding him, "but I'm not glad to see the way ye're looking, Ronald, my lad. Ye're not yourself at all, my man—what's got ye whitey-faced, limp, shaky-looking like that? See here."

She went to the sideboard, and the next instant there

was on the table a bottle of champagne, with a couple of glasses, and a flask of angostura bitters.

"No, no, Katie, lass, I will not touch a drop," said he; and he rose and took his cap in his hand.

"You will not?" she said. "You will not? Why, man, you're ill—you're ill, I tell ye. It's medicine!"

He gripped her by the hand, and took the bottle from her, and put it down on the table.

"If I'm ill, I deserve to be, and that's the fact, lass. Let be—let be, woman; I'm obliged to ye—some other time—some other time."

"Then if you winna, I will," she said, and she got hold of the bottle and opened it and poured out a glass of the foaming fluid.

"And dinna I ken better what's good for ye than ye do yersel'?" said she boldly. "Ay, if ye were ruled by me, and drank nothing but what ye get in this house, there would be little need for ye to be frightened at what a wean might drink. Ye dinna ken your best friends, my lad."

"I know you wish me weel, Katie, lass," said he, for he did not wish to appear ungrateful, "but I'm better without it."

"Yes," said she tauntingly. "Ye're better without sitting up a' night wi' a lot o' roystering fellows, smoking bad tobacco and drinking bad whisky. What mak's your face sae white? It's fusel-oil, if ye maun ken. Here, Ronald, what canna hurt a woman canna hurt a man o' your build—try it, and see if ye dinna feel better."

She put a good dash of bitters into the glass, and poured out the champagne, and offered it to him. He did not wish to offend her; and he himself did not believe the thing could hurt him; he took the glass and sipped about a teaspoonful, and then set it down.

Kate Menzies looked at him, and laughed aloud, and took him by the shoulders and pushed him back into his chair.

"There's a man for ye! Whatna young ladies' seminary have ye been brought up at?"

"I'll tell ye, lass," he retorted. "It was one where they taught folk no to force other folk to drink against their will."

"Then it was different frae the one where I was brought

up, for there, when the doctor ordered anybody to take medicine, they were made to take it. And here's yours," she said; and she stood before him with the glass in her hand. She was good-natured; it would have been ungracious to refuse; he took the glass from her and drank off the contents.

Now a glass of champagne, even with the addition of a little angostura bitters, cannot be called a very powerful potion to those accustomed to such things; but the fact was that he had not touched a drop of any alcoholic fluid for two days; and this seemed to go straight to the brain. It produced a slight, rather agreeable giddiness; a sense of comfort was diffused throughout the system; he was not so anxious to get away. And Kate began talking—upbraiding him for thinking that she wanted to see him otherwise than well and in his usual health, and declaring that if he were guided by her, there would be no need for him to torture himself with total abstinence, and to reduce himself to this abject state. The counsel (which was meant in all honesty) fell on yielding ears; Kate brought some biscuits, and filled herself out another glass.

"That's what it is," she said boldly, "if you would be ruled by my advice there would be no shaking hands and white cheeks for ye. Feeling better, are ye?—ay, I warrant ye! Here, man, try this."

She filled his glass again, adding a good dose of bitters.

"This one I will, but not a drop more," said he. "Ye're a desperate creature, lass, for making folk comfortable."

"I ken what's the matter wi' you better than ye ken yoursel', Ronald," said she, looking at him shrewdly. "You're disappointed — you're out o' heart — because thae fine American friends o' yours hae forgotten you; and you've got sick o' this new work o' yours; and you've got among a lot o' wild fellows that are leading ye to the devil. Mark my words. Americans! Better let a man trust to his ain kith and kin."

"Well, Katie, lass, I maun say this, that ye've just been ower kind to me since ever I came to Glasgow."

"Another glass, Ronald——"

"Not one drop—thank ye"—and this time he rose with the definite resolve to get away, for even these two glasses

had caused a swimming in his head, and he knew not how much more he might drink if he stayed.

"Better go for a long walk, then," said Kate, "and come back at three and have dinner with us. I'll soon put ye on your legs again—trust to me."

But when he went out into the open air, he found himself so giddy and half-dazed and bewildered that, instead of going away for any long walk, he thought he would go back home and lie down. He felt less happy now. Why had he taken this accursed thing after all his resolves?

And then it was—as he went up Renfield Street—that he caught his first glimpse of Meenie. No wonder he turned and slunk rapidly away—anxious to hide anywhere—hoping that Meenie had not seen him. And what a strange thing was this—Meenie in Glasgow town! Oh, if he could only be for a single day as once he had been—as she had known him in the happy times when life went by like a laugh and a song—how wonderful it would be to go along these thoroughfares hoping every moment to catch sight of her face! A dull town?—no, a radiant town, with music in the air, and joy and hope shining down from the skies! But now—he was a cowering fugitive—sick in body and sick in mind—trembling with the excitement of this sudden meeting—and anxious above all other things that he should get back to the seclusion of his lodging unseen.

Well, he managed that, at all events; and there he sate down, wondering over this thing that had just happened. Meenie in Glasgow town!—and why? And why had she sent him the white heather? Nay, he could not doubt but that she had heard; and that this was at once a message of reproach and an appeal; and what answer had he to give supposing that some day or other he should meet her face to face? How could he win back to his former state, so that he should not be ashamed to meet those clear, kind eyes? If there were but some penance now—no matter what suffering it entailed—that would obliterate these last months and restore him to himself, how gladly would he welcome that! But it was not only the bodily sickness—he believed he could mend that; he had still a fine physique; and surely absolute abstention from stimulants, no matter with what accompanying depression, would in time

give him back his health—it was mental sickness and hopelessness and remorse that had to be cured; and how was that to be attempted? Or why should he attempt it? What care had he for the future? To be sure, he would stop drinking, definitely; and he would withdraw himself from those wild companions; and he would have a greater regard for his appearance; so that, if he should by chance meet Meenie face to face, he would not have to be altogether so ashamed. But after? When she had gone away again? For of course he assumed that she was merely here on a visit.

And all this time he was becoming more and more conscious of how far he had fallen—of the change that had come over himself and his circumstances in these few months; and a curious fancy got into his head that he would like to try to realise what he had been like in those former days. He got out his blotting-pad of fragments—not those dedicated to Meenie, that had been carefully put aside—and about the very first of them that he chanced to light upon, when he looked down the rough lines, made him exclaim—

"God bless me, was I like *that*—and no longer ago than last January?"

The piece was called 'A Winter Song'; and surely the man who could write in this gay fashion had an abundant life and joy and hope in his veins, and courage to face the worst bleakness of the winter, and a glad looking-forward to the coming of the spring?

Keen blows the wind upon Clebrig's side,
And the snow lies thick on the heather;
And the shivering hinds are glad to hide
Away from the winter weather.

Chorus: *But soon the birds will begin to sing,*
And we will sing too, my dear,
To give good welcoming to the spring,
In the primrose-time o' the year!

Hark how the black lake, torn and tost,
Thunders along its shores;
And the burn is hard in the grip of the frost,
And white, snow-white are the moors.

Chorus: *But soon the birds will begin to sing,* &c.

O then the warm west winds will blow,
And all in the sunny weather,
It's over the moorlands we will go,
You and I, my love, together.

Chorus: *And then the birds will begin to sing,*
And we will sing too, my dear,
To give good welcoming to the spring,
In the primrose-time o' the year!

Why, surely the blood must have been dancing in his brain when he wrote that; and the days white and clear around him; and life merry and hopeful enough. And now? Well, it was no gladdening thing to think of: he listlessly put away the book.

And then he rose and went and got a pail of water and thrust his head into that—for he was glad to feel that this muzzy sensation was going; and thereafter he dried and brushed his hair with a little more care than usual; and put on a clean collar. Nay, he began to set the little room to rights—and his life in Highland lodges had taught him how to do that about as well as any woman could; and he tried to brighten the window-panes a little, to make the place look more cheerful; and he arranged the things on the mantel-shelf in better order—with the bit of white heather in the middle. Then he came to his briar-root pipe; and paused. He took it up, hesitating.

"Yes, my friend, you must go too," he said, with firm lips; and he deliberately broke it, and tossed the fragments into the grate.

And then he remembered that it was nearly three o'clock, and as he feared that Kate Menzies might send some one of her friends to fetch him, or even come for him herself, he put on his cap, and took a stick in his hand, and went out. In half an hour or so he had left the city behind him and was lost in that melancholy half-country that lies around it on the north; but he cared little now how the landscape looked; he was wondering what had brought Meenie to Glasgow town, and whether she had seen him, and what she had heard of him. And at Inver-Mudal too? Well, they might think the worst of him there if they chose. But had Meenie heard?

He scarcely knew how far he went; but in the dusk of

the evening he was again approaching the city by the Great Western Road; and as he came nearer to the houses, he found that the lamps were lit, and the great town settling down into the gloom of the night. Now he feared no detention; and so it was that when he arrived at Melrose Street he paused there. Should he venture into Queen's Crescent?—it was but a stone's throw away. For he guessed that Meenie must be staying with her sister; and he knew the address that she had given him, though he had never called; nay, he had had the curiosity, once or twice in passing, to glance at the house; and easily enough he could now make it out if he chose. He hesitated for a second or two; then he stealthily made his way along the little thoroughfare; and entered the crescent—but keeping to the opposite side from Mrs. Gemmill's dwelling—and there quietly walked up and down. He could see the windows well enough; they were all of them lit; and the house seemed warm and comfortable; Meenie would be at home there, and among friends, and her bright laugh would be heard from room to room. Perhaps they had company too—since all the windows were ablaze; rich folk, no doubt, for the Gemmills were themselves well-to-do people; and Meenie would be made much of by these strangers, and they would come round her, and the beautiful Highland eyes would be turned towards them, and they would hear her speak in her quiet, gentle, quaint way. Nor was there any trace of envy or jealousy in this man's composition—outcast as he now deemed himself. Jealousy of Meenie? —why, he wished the bountiful heavens to pour their choicest blessings upon her, and the winds to be for ever soft around her, and all sweet and gracious things to await her throughout her childhood and her womanhood and her old age. No; it did not trouble him that these rich folk were fortunate enough to be with her, to listen to her, to look at the clear, frank eyes; it might have troubled him had he thought that they might not fully understand the generous rose-sweetness of her nature, nor fully appreciate her straightforward, unconscious simplicity, nor be sufficiently kind to her. And it was scarcely necessary to consider that; of course they all of them would be kind to her, for how could they help it?

But his guess that they might be entertaining friends was wrong. By and by a cab drove up; in a few minutes the door was opened; he ventured to draw a little nearer; and then he saw three figures—one of then almost assuredly Meenie—come out and enter the vehicle. They drove off; no doubt they were going to some concert or theatre, he thought; and he was glad that Meenie was being amused and entertained so; and was among friends. And as for himself?—

"Well," he was inwardly saying, as he resumed his walk homeward, "the dreams that look so fine when one is up among the hills are knocked on the head sure enough when one comes to a town. I'll have no more to do with these books; nor with the widow Menzies and her friends either. To-morrow morning I'm off to the recruiting-sergeant—that's the best thing for me now."

By the time he had got home he was quite resolved upon this. But there was a note lying there on the table for him.

"That woman again," he said to himself. "Katie, lass, I'm afraid you and I must part, but I hope we'll part good friends."

And then his eyes grew suddenly startled. He took up the note, staring at the outside, apparently half afraid. And then he opened it and read—but in a kind of wild and breathless bewilderment—these two or three lines, written in rather a shaky hand—

"DEAR RONALD—I wish to see you. Would it trouble you to be at the corner of Sauchiehall Street and Renfield Street to-morrow morning at eleven?—I will not detain you more than a few minutes. Yours sincerely,

"MEENIE DOUGLAS."

There was not much sleep for him that night.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A MEETING.

INDEED there was no sleep at all for him that night. He knew not what this summons might mean; and all the assurance and self-confidence of former days was gone now; he was nervous, distracted, easily alarmed; ready to imagine evil things; and conscious that he was in no fit state to present himself before Meenie. And yet he never thought of slinking away. Meenie desired to see him, and that was enough. Always and ever he had been submissive to her slightest wish. And if it were merely to reproach him, to taunt him with his weakness and folly, that she had now sent for him, he would go all the same. He deserved that and more. If only it had been some one else—not Meenie—whose resolute clear eyes he had to meet!

That brief interview over—and then for the Queen's shilling: this was what was before him now, and the way seemed clear enough. But so unnerved was he that the mere idea of having to face this timid girl made him more and more restless and anxious; and at last, towards three o'clock in the morning, he, not having been to bed at all, opened the door and stole down the stair and went out into the night. The black heavens were pulsating from time to time with a lurid red sent over from the ironworks in the south; somewhere there was the footfall of a policeman unseen; the rest was darkness and a terrible silence. He wandered away through the lonely streets, he scarcely knew whither. He was longing that the morning should come, and yet dreading its approach. He reached the little thoroughfare that leads into Queen's Crescent; but he held on his way without turning aside; it was not for this poor trembling ghost and coward to pass under her window, with "Sleep dwell upon thine eyes, peace in thy breast" as his unspoken benediction. He held on his way towards the open country, wandering quite aimlessly, and busy only with guesses and forebodings and hopeless desires that he might suddenly find before him the dark-rolling waters of Lethe, and plunge into them, and wash away from him all

knowledge and recollection of the past. When at length he turned towards the city, the gray dawn was breaking in the dismal skies; the first of the milk-carts came slowly crawling into the town; and large waggons laden with vegetables and the like. He got back to his lodgings; threw himself on the bed; and there had an hour or two of broken and restless sleep.

When he awoke he went quickly to the window. The skies were heavy; there was a dull drizzle in the thick atmosphere; the pavements were wet. It was with a sudden sense of relief that he saw what kind of a day it was. Of course Meenie would never think of coming out on so wet and miserable a morning. He would keep the appointment, doubtless; she would not appear—taking it for granted he would not expect her; and then—then for the recruiting-sergeant and a final settlement of all these ills and shames. Nevertheless he dressed himself with scrupulous neatness; and brushed and rebrushed his clothes; and put on his deerstalker's cap—for the sake of old days. And then, just as he was leaving, he took a little bit of the white heather, and placed it in his waistcoat pocket; if the talisman had any subtle power whatever, all the good luck that he could wish for was to find Meenie not too bitter in her scorn.

He made his way to the corner of Sauchiehall Street some little time before the appointed hour. But it was actually raining now; of course Meenie would not come. So he idly paced up and down; staring absently at the shop windows; occasionally looking along the street, but with no great expectation; and thinking how well content and satisfied with themselves these people seemed to be who were now hurrying by under their streaming umbrellas. His thoughts went far afield. Vimiera—Salamanca—Ciudad Rodrigo — Balaklava — Alma — Lucknow — Alumbagh — these were the names and memories that were in his head. An old school companion of his own had got the V.C. for a conspicuous act of daring at the storming of the Redan, and if that were not likely to be his proud fate, at least in this step he was resolved upon he would find safety and a severance from degrading bonds, and a final renunciation of futile ambitions and foolish and idle dreams.

He was looking into a bookseller's window. A timid hand touched his arm.

"Ronald!"

And oh! the sudden wonder and the thrill of finding before him those beautiful, friendly, glad eyes, so true, so frank, so full of all womanly tenderness and solicitude, and abundant and obvious kindness! Where was the reproach of them? They were full of a kind of half-hidden joy—timid and reluctant, perhaps, a little—but honest and clear and unmistakable; and as for him—well, his breath was clean taken away by the surprise, and by the sudden revulsion of feeling from a listless despair to the consciousness that Meenie was still his friend; and all he could do was to take the gentle hand in both of his and hold it fast.

"I—I heard that you were not—not very well, Ronald," she managed to say.

And then the sound of her voice—that brought with it associations of years—seemed to break the spell that was on him.

"Bless me, Miss Douglas," he said, "you will get quite wet! Will you not put up your umbrella—or—or take shelter somewhere?"

"Oh, I do not mind the rain," she said, and there was a kind of tremulous laugh about her lips, as if she were trying to appear very happy indeed. "I do not mind the rain. We did not heed the rain much at Inver-Mudal, Ronald, when there was anything to be done. And—and so glad I am to see you! It seems so long a time since you left the Highlands."

"Ay; and it has been a bad time for me," he said; and now he was beginning to get his wits together again. He could not keep Miss Douglas thus standing in the wet. He would ask her why she had sent for him; and then he would bid her good-bye and be off; but with a glad, glad heart that he had seen her even for these few seconds.

"And there are so many things to be talked over after so long a time," said she; "I hope you have a little while to spare, Ronald——"

"But to keep you in the rain, Miss Douglas——"

"Oh, but this will do," said she (and whatever her inward

thoughts were, her speech was blithe enough). "See, I will put up the umbrella, and you will carry it for me—it is not the first time, Ronald, that you and I have had to walk in the rain together, and without any umbrella. And do you know why I do not care for the rain?" she added, glancing at him again with the frank, affectionate eyes; "it's because I am so glad to find you looking not so ill after all, Ronald."

"Not so ill, maybe, as I deserve to be," he answered; but he took the umbrella and held it over her; and they went down Renfield Street a little way and then into West Regent Street; and if she did not put her hand on his arm, at least she was very close to him, and the thrill of the touch of her dress was magnetic and strange. Strange, indeed; and strange that he should find himself walking side by side with Meenie through the streets of Glasgow town; and listening mutely and humbly the while to all her varied talk of what had happened since he left Inver-Mudal. Whatever she had heard of him, it seemed to be her wish to ignore that. She appeared to assume that their relations to each other now were just as they had been in former days. And she was quite bright and cheerful and hopeful; how could he know that the first glance at his haggard face had struck like a dagger to her heart?

Moreover, the rain gradually ceased; the umbrella was lowered; a light west wind was quietly stirring; and by and by a warmer light began to interfuse itself through the vaporous atmosphere. Nay, by the time they had reached Blythswood Square, a pallid sunshine was clearly shining on the wet pavements and door-steps and house-fronts; and far overhead, and dimly seen through the mysteriously moving pall of mist and smoke, there were faint touches of blue, foretelling the opening out to a joyfuller day. The wide square was almost deserted; they could talk to each other as they chose; though, indeed, the talking was mostly on her side. Something, he scarcely knew what, kept him silent and submissive; but his heart was full of gratitude towards her; and from time to time—for how could he help it?—some chance word or phrase of appeal would bring him face to face with Meenie's eyes.

So far she had cunningly managed to avoid all reference

to his own affairs, so that he might get accustomed to this friendly conversation; but at length she said—

"And now about yourself, Ronald?"

"The less said the better," he answered. "I wish that I had never come to this town."

"What?" she said, with a touch of remonstrance in her look. "Have you so soon forgotten the fine prospects you started away with? Surely not! Why, it was only the other day I had a letter from Miss Hodson—the young American lady, you remember—and she was asking all about you, and whether you had passed the examination yet; and she said her father and herself were likely to come over next spring, and hoped to hear you had got the certificate."

He seemed to pay no heed to this news.

"I wish I had never left Inver-Mudal," he said. "I was content there; and what more can a man wish for anywhere? It's little enough of that I've had since I came to this town. But for whatever has happened to me, I've got myself to blame; and—and I beg your pardon, Miss Douglas, I will not bother you with any poor concerns of mine——"

"But if I wish to be bothered?" she said quickly. "Ronald, do you know why I have come from the Highlands?"

Her face was blushing a rosy red; but her eyes were steadfast and clear and kind; and she had stopped in her walk to confront him.

"I heard the news of you—yes, I heard the news," she continued; and it was his eyes, not hers, that were downcast; "and I knew you would do much for me—at least, I thought so,—and I said to myself that if I were to go to Glasgow, and find you, and ask you for my sake to give me a promise——"

"I know what ye would say, Miss Douglas," he interposed, for she was dreadfully embarrassed. "To give up the drink. Well, it's easily promised and easily done, *now* —indeed, I've scarcely touched a drop since ever I got the bit of heather you sent me. It was a kind thing to think of —maybe I'm making too bold to think it was you that sent it——"

"I knew you would know that it was I that sent it—I meant you to know," she said simply.

"It was never any great love of the drink that drove me that way," he said. "I think it was that I might be able to forget for a while."

"To forget what, Ronald?" she asked, regarding him.

"That ever I was such a fool as to leave the only people I cared for," he answered frankly, "and come away here among strangers, and bind myself to strive for what I had no interest in. But bless me, Miss Douglas, to think I should keep ye standing here—talking about my poor affairs——"

"Ronald," she said calmly, "do you know that I have come all the way to Glasgow to see you and to talk about your affairs and nothing else; and you are not going to hurry away? Tell me about yourself. What are you doing? Are you getting on with your studies?"

He shook his head.

"No, no. I have lost heart that way altogether. Many's the time I have thought of writing to Lord Ailine, and asking to be taken back, if it was only to look after the dogs. I should never have come to this town; and now I am going away from it, for good."

"Going away? Where?" she said, rather breathlessly.

"I want to make a clean break off from the kind of life I have been leading," said he, "and I know the surest way. I mean to enlist into one of the Highland regiments that's most likely to be ordered off on foreign service."

"Ronald!"

She seized his hand and held it.

"Ronald, you will not do that!"

Well, he was startled by the sudden pallor of her face; and bewildered by the entreaty so plainly visible in the beautiful eyes; and perhaps he did not quite know how he answered. But he spoke quickly.

"Oh, of course I will not do that," he said, "of course I will not do that, Miss Douglas, so long as you are in Glasgow. How could I? Why, the chance of seeing you, even at a distance—for a moment even—I would wait days for that. When I made up my mind to enlist, I had no thought that I might ever have the chance of seeing you.

Oh no; I will wait until you have gone back to the Highlands—how could I go away from Glasgow and miss any single chance of seeing you, if only for a moment?"

"Yes, yes," she said eagerly, "you will do nothing until then, anyway; and in the meantime I shall see you often——"

His face lighted up with surprise.

"Will you be so kind as that?" he said quickly. And then he dropped her hand. "No, no. I am so bewildered by the gladness of seeing you that—that I forgot. Let me go my own way. You were always so generous in your good nature that you spoiled us all at Inver-Mudal; here—here it is different. You are living with your sister, I suppose? and of course you have many friends, and many things to do and places to visit. You must not trouble about me; but as long as you are in Glasgow—well, there will always be the chance of my catching a glimpse of you—and if you knew what it was—to me——"

But here he paused abruptly, fearful of offending by confessing too much; and now they had resumed their leisurely walking along the half-dried pavements; and Meenie was revolving certain little schemes and artifices in her brain—with a view to their future meeting. And the morning had grown so much brighter; and there was a pleasant warmth of sunlight in the air; and she was glad to know that at least for a time Ronald would not be leaving the country. She turned to him with a smile.

"I shall have to be going back home now," she said, "but you will not forget, Ronald, that you have made me two promises this morning."

"It's little you know, Miss Douglas," said he, "what I would do for you, if I but knew what ye wished. I mean for you yourself. For my own self, I care but little what happens to me. I have made a mistake in my life somehow. I——"

"Then will you promise me more, Ronald?" said she quickly; for she would not have him talk in that strain.

"What?"

"Will you make me a promise that you will not enlist at all?"

"I will, if it is worth heeding one way or the other."

"But make me the promise," said she, and she regarded him with no unfriendly eyes.

"There's my hand on't."

"And another—that you will work hard and try and get the forestry certificate?"

"What's the use of that, lass?" said he, forgetting his respect for her. "I have put all that away now. That's all away beyond me now."

"No," she said proudly. "No. It is not. Oh, do you think that the people who know you do not know what your ability is? Do you think they have lost their faith in you? Do you think they are not still looking forward and hoping the time may come that they may be proud of your success, and—and—come and shake hands with you, Ronald—and say how glad they are? And have you no regard for them, or heed for their—their affection towards you?"

Her cheeks were burning red, but she was far too much in earnest to measure her phrases; and she held his hand in an imploring kind of way; and surely, if ever a brave and unselfish devotion and love looked out from a woman's eyes, that was the message that Meenie's eyes had for him then.

"I had a kind of fancy," he said, "that if I could get abroad—with one o' those Highland regiments—there might come a time when I could have the chance of winning the V.C.—the Victoria Cross, I mean; ay, and it would have been a proud day for me the day that I was able to send that home to you."

"To me, Ronald?" she said, rather faintly.

"Yes, yes," said he. "Whatever happened to me after that day would not matter much."

"But you have promised——"

"And I will keep that promise, and any others you may ask of me, Miss Douglas."

"That you will call me Meenie, for one?" she said, quite simply and frankly.

"No, no; I could not do that," he answered—and yet the permission sounded pleasant to the ear.

"We are old friends, Ronald," she said. "But that is a small matter. Well, now, I must be getting back home;

and yet I should like to see you again soon, Ronald, for there are so many things I have to talk over with you. Will you come and see my sister ? "

His hesitation and embarrassment were so obvious that she instantly repented her of having thrown out this invitation ; moreover, it occurred to herself that there would be little chance of her having any private speech of Ronald (which was of such paramount importance at this moment) if he called at Queen's Crescent.

"No, not yet," she said, rather shamefacedly and with downcast eyes ; "perhaps, since—since there are one or two private matters to talk over, we—we could meet just as now ? It is not—taking up too much of your time, Ronald ? "

"Why," said he, "if I could see you for a moment, any day—merely to say 'good morning'—that would be a well-spent day for me ; no more than that used to make many a long day quite happy for me at Inver-Mudal."

" Could you be here to-morrow at eleven, Ronald ? " she asked, looking up shyly.

"Yes, yes, and gladly ! " he answered ; and presently they had said good-bye to each other ; and she had set out for Queen's Crescent by herself ; while he turned towards the east.

And now all his being seemed transfused with joy and deep gratitude ; and the day around him was clear and sweet and full of light ; and all the world seemed swinging onward in an ether of happiness and hope. The dreaded interview !—where was the reproach and scorn of it ? Instead of that it had been all radiant with trust and courage and true affection ; and never had Meenie's eyes been so beautiful and solicitous with all good wishes ; never had her voice been so strangely tender, every tone of it seeming to reach the very core of his heart. And how was he to requite her for this bountiful care and sympathy—that overawed him almost when he came to think of it ? Nay, repayment of any kind was all impossible : where was the equivalent of such generous regard ? But at least he could faithfully observe the promises he had made—yes, these and a hundred more ; and perhaps this broken life of

his might still be of some small service, if in any way it could win for him a word of Meenie's approval.

And then, the better to get away from temptation, and to cut himself wholly adrift from his late companions, he walked home to his lodgings and packed up his few things and paid his landlady a fortnight's rent in lieu of notice, as had been agreed upon. That same night he was established in new quarters, in the Garscube Road; and he had left no address behind him; so that if Kate Menzies, or the skipper, or any of his cronies of the Harmony Club were to wonder at his absence and seek to hunt him out, they would seek and hunt in vain.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CONFESSION.

THAT night he slept long and soundly, and his dreams were all about Inver-Mudal and the quiet life among the hills; and, strangely enough, he fancied himself there, and Meenie absent; and always he was wondering when she was coming back from Glasgow town, and always he kept looking for her as each successive mail-cart came through from the south. And then in the morning, when he awoke, and found himself in the great city itself, and knew that Meenie was there too, and that in a few hours they were to meet, his heart was filled with joy, and the day seemed rich and full of promise, and the pale and sickly sunlight that struggled in through the window panes and lit up the dusty little room seemed a glorious thing, bringing with it all glad tidings. "You, fortunate Glasgow town!" he had rhymed in the olden days; and this was the welcome that Glasgow town had for Meenie—sunlight, and perhaps a glimpse of blue here and there, and a light west wind blowing in from the heights of Dowanhill and Hillhead.

He dressed with particular care; and if his garments were not of the newest fashionable cut, at least they clung with sufficient grace and simplicity of outline to the manly and well-set figure. And he knew himself that he was looking less haggard than on the previous day. He was feeling altogether better; the long and sound sleep had

proved a powerful restorative; and his heart was light with hope. The happy sunlight shining out there on the gray pavements and the gray fronts of the houses!—was there ever in all the world a fairer and joyfuller city than this same Glasgow town?

He was in Blythswood Square long before the appointed hour; and she also was a little early. But this time it was Meenie who was shy and embarrassed; she was not so earnest and anxious as she had been the day before, for much of her errand was now satisfactorily accomplished; and when, after a moment's hesitation, he asked her whether she would not go and have a look at the terraces and trees in the West End Park, it seemed so like two lovers setting out for a walk together that the conscious blood mantled in her cheeks, and her eyes were averted. But she strove to be very business-like; and asked him a number of questions about Mr. Weems; and wondered that the Americans had said nothing further about the purchase of an estate in the Highlands, of which there had been some little talk. In this way—and with chance remarks and inquiries about Maggie, and the Reverend Andrew, and Mr. Murray, and Harry the terrier, and what not—they made their way through various thoroughfares until they reached the tall gates of the West End Park.

Here there was much more quietude than in those noisy streets; and when they had walked along one of the wide terraces, until they came to a seat partly surrounded by shrubs, Meenie suggested that they might sit down there, for she wished to reason seriously with him. He smiled a little; but he was very plastic in her hands. Nay, was it not enough merely to hear Meenie speak—no matter what the subject might be? And then he was sitting by her side, with all that wide prospect stretched out before them—the spacious terraces, the groups of trees, the curving river, and the undulating hills beyond. It was a weird kind of a morning, moreover; for the confused and wan sunlight kept struggling through the ever-changing mist, sometimes throwing a coppery radiance on the late autumn foliage, or again shining pale and silver-like as the fantastic cloud-wreaths slowly floated onward. The view before them was mysterious and vast because of its very vague-

ness; and even the new University buildings—over there on the heights above the river—looked quite imposing and picturesque, for they loomed large and dusky and remote through the bewildering sunlit haze.

"Now, Ronald," she said, "I want you to tell me how it was you came to lose heart so, and to give up what you undertook to do when you left Inver-Mudal. Why, when you left you were full of such high hopes; and every one was sure of your success; and you were all anxiety to begin."

"That's true, Miss Douglas," he answered, rather absently. "I think my head must have been in a kind of a whirl at that time. It seemed so fine and easy a thing to strive for; and I did not stop to ask what use it would be to me, supposing I got it."

"The use?" she said. "A better position for yourself—isn't it natural to strive for that? And perhaps, if you did not care much to have more money for yourself—for you have very strange notions, Ronald, about some things—you must see how much kindness can be done to others by people who are well off. I don't understand you at all——"

"Well, then," said he, shifting his ground, "I grew sick and tired of the town life. I was never meant for that. Every day——"

"But, Ronald," she said, interrupting him in a very definite tone of remonstrance, "you knew that your town life was only a matter of months! And the harder you worked the sooner it would be over! What reason was that?"

"There may have been other reasons," he said, but rather unwillingly.

"What were they?"

"I cannot tell you."

"Ronald," she said, and the touch of wounded pride in her voice thrilled him strangely, "I have come all the way from the Highlands—and—and done what few girls would have done—for your sake; and yet you will not be frank with me—when all that I want is to see you going straight towards a happier future."

"I dare not tell you, you would be angry."

"I am not given to anger," she answered, calmly, and yet

with a little surprised resentment. For she could but imagine that this was some entanglement of debt, or something of the kind, of which he was ashamed to speak; and yet, unless she knew clearly the reasons that had induced him to abandon the project that he had undertaken so eagerly, how was she to argue with him and urge him to resume it?

"Well, then, we'll put it this way," said he, after a second or two of hesitation—and his face was a little pale, and his eyes were fixed on her with an anxious nervousness, so that, at the first sign of displeasure, he could instantly stop. "There was a young lass that I knew there—in the Highlands—and she was, oh yes, she was out of my station altogether, and away from me—and yet the seeing her from time to time, and a word now and again, was a pleasure to me, greater maybe than I confessed to myself—the greatest that I had in life, indeed."

She made no sign, and he continued, slowly and watchfully, and still with that pale earnestness in his face.

"And then I wrote things about her—and amused myself with fancies—well, what harm could that do to her?—so long as she knew nothing about it. And I thought I was doing no harm to myself either, for I knew it was impossible there could be anything between us, and that she would be going away sooner or later, and I too. Yes, and I did go away, and in high feather, to be sure, and everything was to be for the best, and I was to have a fight for money like the rest of them. God help me, lassie, before I was a fortnight in the town, my heart was like to break."

She sate quite still and silent, trembling a little, perhaps, her eyes downcast, her fingers working nervously with the edge of the small shawl she wore.

"I had cut myself away from the only thing I craved for in the world—just the seeing and speaking to her from time to time, for I had no right to think of more than that; and I was alone and down-hearted; and I began to ask myself what was the use of this slavery. Ay, there might have been a use in it—if I could have said to myself, "Well, now, fight as hard as ye can, and if ye win, who knows but that ye might go back to the north, and claim her as the prize?" But that was not to be thought of. She had

never hinted anything of the kind to me, nor I to her; but when I found myself cut away from her like that, the days were terrible, and my heart was like lead, and I knew that I had cast away just everything that I cared to live for. Then I fell in with some companions—a woman cousin o' mine and some friends of hers—and they helped to make me forget what I didna wish to think of, and so the time passed. Well, now, that is the truth; and ye can understand, Miss Douglas, that I have no heart to begin again, and the soldiering seemed the best thing for me, and a rifle-bullet my best friend. But—but I will keep the promise I made to ye—that is enough on that score; oh yes, I will keep that promise, and any others ye may care to ask; only I cannot bide in Glasgow."

He heard a faint sob; he could see that tears were gliding stealthily down her half-hidden face; and his heart was hot with anger against himself that he had caused her this pain. But how could he go away? A timid hand sought his, and held it for a brief moment with a tremulous clasp.

"I am very sorry, Ronald," she managed to say, in a broken voice. "I suppose it could not have been otherwise—I suppose it could not have been otherwise."

For some time they sate in silence—though he could hear an occasional half-stifled sob. He could not pretend to think that Meenie did not understand; and this was her great pity for him; she did not drive him away in anger—her heart was too gentle for that.

"Miss Douglas," said he at length, "I'm afraid I've spoiled your walk for you wi' my idle story. Maybe the best thing I can do now is just to leave you."

"No—stay," she said, under her breath; and she was evidently trying to regain her composure. "You spoke—you spoke of that girl—O Ronald, I wish I had never come to Glasgow!—I wish I had never heard what you told me just now!"

And then, after a second—

"But how could I help it—when I heard what was happening to you, and all the wish in the world I had was to know that you were brave and well and successful and happy? I could not help it! . . . And now—and now—

Ronald," she said, as if with a struggle against that choking weight of sobs; for much was demanded of her at this moment; and her voice seemed powerless to utter all that her heart prompted her to say, "if—if that girl you spoke of—if she was to see clearly what is best for her life and for yours—if she was to tell you to take up your work again, and work hard, and hard, and hard—and then, some day, it might be years after this, when you came back again to the north, you would find her still waiting?——"

"Meenie!"

He grasped her hand: his face was full of a bewilderment of hope—not joy, not triumph, but as if he hardly dared to believe what he had heard.

"O Ronald," she said, in a kind of wild way,—and she turned her wet eyes towards him in full, unhesitating abandonment of affection and trust, nor could she withdraw the hand that he clasped so firmly,—"what will you think of me?—what will you think of me?—but surely there should be no hiding or false shame, and surely there is for you and for me in the world but the one end to hope for; and if not that—why, then, nothing. If you go away, if you have nothing to hope for, it will be the old misery back again, the old despair; and as for me—well, that is not of much matter. But, Ronald—Ronald—whatever happens—don't think too hardly of me—I know I should not have said so much—but it would just break my heart to think you were left to yourself in Glasgow—with nothing to care for or hope for——"

"Think of you!" he cried, and in a kind of wonder of rapture he was regarding Meenie's tear-filled eyes, that made no shame of meeting his look. "I think of you—and ever will—as the tenderest and kindest and truest-hearted of women." He had both her hands now; and he held them close and warm. "Even now—at this minute—when you have given yourself to me—you have no thought of yourself at all—it is all about me, that am not worth it, and never was. Is there any other woman in the world so brave and unselfish! Meenie, lass—no, for this once—and no one will ever be able to take the memory away from me—for this once let me call you my love and my

darling—my true-hearted love and darling!—well, now, that's said and done with; and many a day to come I will think over these few minutes, and think of sitting here with you in this West End Park on the bench here, and the trees around, and I will say to myself that I called Meenie my love and my darling, and she was not angry—not angry."

"No, not angry, Ronald," and there was a bit of a strange and tender smile shining through the tears in the blue-gray eyes.

"Ay, indeed," said he, more gravely, "that will be something for me; maybe, everything. I can scarcely believe that this has just happened—my heart's in a flame, and my head's gone daft, I think; and it seems as if there was nothing for me but to thank God for having sent you into the world and made you as unselfish and generous as you are. But that's not the way of looking at it, my—my good lass. You have too little thought for yourself. Why, what a coward I should be if I did not ask you to think of the sacrifice you are making!"

"I am making no sacrifice, Ronald," she said, simply and calmly. "I spoke what my heart felt; and perhaps too readily. But I am going back to the Highlands. I shall stay there till you come for me, if ever you come for me. They spoke of my going for a while to my mother's cousins; but I shall not do that; no, I shall be at Inver-Mudal, or wherever my father is, and you will easily get to know that, Ronald. But if things go ill, and you do not come for me—or—or, if ye do not care to come for me—well, that is as the world goes, and no one can tell beforehand. Or many years may go by, and when you do come for me, Ronald, you may find me a gray-haired woman—but you will find me a single woman."

She spoke quite calmly; this was no new resolve; it was his lips, not hers, that were tremulous, for a second or so. But only for a second; for now he was all anxiety to cheer her and comfort her as regards the future. He could not bring himself to ask her to consider again; the prize was too precious; rather he spoke of all the chances and hopes of life, and of the splendid future that she had placed before him. Now there was something worth striv-

ing for—something worth the winning. And already, with the wild audacity that was now pulsating in his veins, he saw the way clear—a long way, perhaps, and tedious, but all filled with light and strewn with blossoms here or there (these were messages, or a look, or a smile, from Meenie), and at the end of it, waiting to welcome him, Love-Meenie, Rose-Meenie, with love-radiance shining in her eyes.

He almost talked her into cheerfulness (for she had grown a little despondent after that first devotion of self-surrender); and by and by she rose from the bench. She was a little pale.

"I don't know whether I have done well or ill, Ronald," she said, in a low voice, "but I do not think I could have done otherwise. It is for you to show hereafter that I have done right."

"But do you regret?" he said quickly.

She turned to him with a strange smile on her face.

"Regret? No. I do not think I could have done otherwise. But it is for you to show to all of them that I have done right."

"And if it could only be done all at once, Meenie; that's where the soldier has his chance——"

"No, it is not to be done all at once," she said; "it will be a hard and difficult waiting for you, and a slow waiting for me——"

"Do you think I care for any hardness or difficulty *now?*" he said. "Dear Meenie, you little know what a prize you have set before me. Why, now, here, every moment that I pass with you seems worth a year; and yet I grudge every one——"

"But why?" she said, looking up.

"I am going over to Pollokshaws the instant I leave you to try to pick up the threads of everything I had let slip. Dear lass, you have made every quarter of an hour in the day far too short; I want twelve hours in the day to be with you, and other twelve to be at my work."

"We must see each other very little, Ronald," she said, as they set out to leave the Park. "People would only talk——"

"But to morrow——"

"No. My sister is going down to Dunoon to-morrow to see about the shutting up of the house for the winter, and I am going with her. But on Friday—if you were in the Botanic Gardens—early in the forenoon—perhaps I could see you then?"

"Yes, yes," said he eagerly; and as they went down towards the Woodland Road he strove to talk to her very cheerfully and brightly indeed, for he could not but see that she was a little troubled.

Then, when they were about to part, she seemed to try to rouse herself a little, and to banish whatever doubts and hesitations may have been harassing her mind.

"Ronald," she said, with a bit of a smile, "when you told me of that girl in the Highlands that you knew, you said you—you had never said anything to her that would lead her to imagine you were thinking of her. But you wrote her a letter."

"What?"

"Yes; and she saw it," Meenie continued; but with downcast eyes. "It was not meant for her to see; but she saw it. It was some verses—very pretty they were—but —but rather daring—considering that——"

"Bless me," he exclaimed, "did you see that?"

She nodded. And then his mind went swiftly back to that period.

"Meenie, that was the time you were angry with me."

She looked up.

"And yet not so very angry, Ronald."

"*But Love from Love towards school with heavy looks.*" Not always. Five miles an hour or so was the pace at which Ronald sped over to Pollokshaws; and very much astonished was the nervous little Mr. Weems over the new-found and anxious energy of his quondam pupil. Ronald remained all day there, and, indeed, did not leave the cottage until it was very late. As he walked back into the town all the world around him lay black and silent; no stars were visible; no crescent moon; nor any dim outline of cloud; but the dusky heavens were flushed with the red fires of the ironworks, as the flames shot fiercely up

and sent their sullen splendour across the startled night. And that, it may have occurred to him, was as the lurid glare that had lit up his own life for a while, until the fires had grown down, and the world grown sombre and dead; but surely there was a clear dawn about to break by and by in the east—clear and silvery and luminous—like the first glow of the morn along the Clebrig slopes.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AT THE PEAR-TREE WELL.

He was almost glad that Meenie was going away for these two days, for he was desperately anxious to make up for the time he had lost; and the good-natured little Mr. Weems, instead of showing any annoyance or resentment, rather aided and abetted this furious zeal on the part of his pupil. All the same, Ronald found occasion to be within easy distance of the railway station on the morning of Meenie's departure; and about a few minutes to eight he saw herself and her sister step out of one of the cabs that were being driven up. If only he could have signalled a good-bye to her! But he kept discreetly in the background; glad enough to see that she was looking so fresh and bright and cheerful—even laughing she was, over some little mishap, as he imagined. And then so trim and neat she was in her travelling attire; and so daintily she walked—the graceful figure moving (as he thought) as if to a kind of music. The elder sister took the tickets; then they entered one of the carriages; and presently the train had slowly rolled away from the platform and was gone.

That glimpse of Meenie had filled his heart with unutterable delight; he scarcely knew what he was doing when he got out into the open air again. The day seemed a festal day; there was gladness abroad in the very atmosphere; it was a day for good-companionship, and the drinking of healths, and the wishing of good wishes to all the world. His thoughts were all with Meenie—in that railway carriage flying away down to Greenock; and yet here, around him, there was gladness and happiness that seemed to demand some actual expression and recognition!

Almost unconsciously—and with his brain busy with very distant matters—he walked into a public-house.

"Give me a glass of Highland whisky, my lad," said he to the young man standing behind the counter: "Talisker, if ye have it."

The whisky was measured out and placed before him. He did not look at it. He was standing a little apart. And now Meenie would be out by Pollokshields, in the whiter air; by and by she would pass through Paisley's smoke; then through the placid pastoral country until she would come in sight of Dumbarton's castled crags and the long wide valley of the Clyde. And then the breezy waters of the Firth; and the big steamboat; and Meenie walking up and down the white deck, and drawing the sealskin coat a little tighter round the slight and graceful figure. There would be sunlight there; and fresh sea-winds blowing up from Arran and Bute, from Cumbrae and Cantire. And Meenie—

But at this moment his attention was somehow drawn to the counter, and he was startled into a consciousness of where he was and what he was doing. He glanced at the whisky—with a kind of shiver of fright.

"God forgive me—I did not want it," he said to the astonished youth who was looking at him, "but here's the money for 't."

He put down the few coppers on the counter and hurriedly left the place. But the sudden fright was all. As he sped away out to Pollokshaws he was not haunted by any consciousness of having escaped from danger. He was sure enough of himself in that direction. If a mortal craving for drink had seized him, he would almost have been glad of the fight; it would be something to slay the dragon, for Meenie's sake. But he had naturally a sound and firm constitution; his dissipation had not lasted long enough to destroy his strength of will; and indeed this incident of the public-house, so far from terrifying him with any doubts as to the future, only served to remind him that dreams and visions—and brains gone "daft" with access of joy—are not appropriate to the thoroughfares of a business city.

No; as he walked rapidly away from the town, by way

of Strathbungo and Crossmyloof and Shawlands, what he was chiefly busy with was the hammering out of some tune that would fit the winter song he had chanced upon a few days before. And now he did not regard those gay and galloping verses with a stupefied wonder as to how he ever came to write them; rather he tried to reach again to that same pitch of light-heartedness; and of course it was for Meenie's delight, and for hers only, that this tune had to be got at somehow. It was a laughing, glad kind of a tune that he wanted:

O then the warm west winds will blow,
And all in the sunny weather
It's over the moorlands we will go,
You and I, my love, together.

Chorus: *And then the birds will begin to sing,*
And we will sing too, my dear,
To give good welcoming to the spring,
In the primrose-time o' the year—
In the primrose-time,
In the primrose-time,
In the primrose-time o' the year—
To give good welcoming to the spring,
In the primrose time o' the year.

Yes; and it was in the coming spring-time that he was to try for the certificate in forestry; and thereafter—if he were so fortunate as to get that—he might set forth on the path that the Americans had so confidently sketched out for him—the path that was now to lead him to Meenie, as the final crown and prize. "You may find me a gray-haired woman, Ronald," she had said, "but you will find me a single woman." But still he was young in years; and there was hope and courage in his veins; and what if he were to win to her, after all, before there was a single streak of middle age in the beautiful and abundant brown tresses?

Then, again, on the evening before the morning on which he was to meet her in the Botanic Gardens, he undid the package containing that anthology of verse devoted to Meenie; and began to turn the pieces over, wondering which, or if any of them, would please her, if he took them to her. But this was rather a visionary Meenie he found in these verses; not the real and actual Meenie who had sate

beside him on a bench in the West End Park, and placed her hand in his, and pledged her life to him, while the beautiful, tear-filled eyes sought his so bravely. And could he not write something about this actual Meenie; and about Glasgow; and the wonder she had brought into the great, prosaic city? He tried his hand at it, anyway, for a little while:

The dim red fires of yonder gleaming forge
Now dwell triumphant on the brow of night;
A thousand chimneys blackest smoke disgorge,
Repelling from the world the stars' pale light:

A little taper shines adown the street,
From out her casement where she lingers still
To listen to the sound of passing feet,
That all the night with leaden echoes fill—

But he soon stopped. This was not like Meenie at all—Meenie, who was ever associated in his mind with flowers and birds and fair sunlight and the joy of the summer hills. He threw that spoiled sheet into the fire; and sought among the old pieces for one that he might copy out fairly for her; and this is what he eventually chose:

All on a fair May morning
The roses began to blow;
Some of them tipped with crimson,
Some of them tipped with snow.

But they looked the one to the other,
And they looked adown the glen;
They looked the one to the other,
And they rubbed their eyes again.

"O there is the lark in the heavens,
And the mavis sings in the tree;
And surely this is the summer,
But Meenie we cannot see.

"Surely there must be summer
Coming to this far clime;
And has Meenie, Love Meenie, forgotten,
Or have we mistaken the time?"

Then a foxglove spake to the roses:
"O hush you and cease your din;
For I'm going back to my sleeping,
Till Meenie brings summer in."

Well, it was but a trifle; but trifles are sometimes important things when seen through lovers' eyes.

Next morning he went along to the Botanic Gardens; paid his sixpence with equanimity (for he had dispensed with the ceremony of dining the previous day) and entered. It was rather a pleasant morning; and at first sight he was rather shocked by the number of people—nursemaids and children, most of them—who were idly strolling along the trimly-kept walks or seated in front of the wide open parterres. How was he to find Meenie in such a great place; and, if he did find her, were they to walk up and down before so many eyes? For he had guessed that Meenie would be in no hurry to tell her sister of what had happened—until the future seemed a little more clear and secure; it would be time enough to publish the news when that had assumed a more definite character.

But on and on he went—with glances that were keen and sharp enough—until suddenly, just as he had passed the greenhouses, he came almost face to face with Meenie, who was seated on a bench, all by herself, with a book before her. But she was not reading. "O and proudly rose she up"; and yet shyly, too; and as he took her hand in his, the joy with which she regarded him needed no confession in words—it was written there in the clear tender eyes.

"Indeed I am so glad to see you, Ronald!" she said. "I have been so miserable these two days——"

"But why?" he asked.

"I don't know, hardly. I have been wondering whether I had done right; and then to go about with my sister, keeping this secret from her; and then I was thinking of the going away back to Inver-Mudal, and never seeing you, and not knowing how you were getting on. But now—now that you are here, it seems all quite right and safe. You look as if you brought good news. What does he think, Ronald?"

"He?" he repeated. "Who?"

"The old man out there at Pollokshaws, is it?"

Ronald laughed.

"Oh, the old gentleman seems pretty confident; but for very shame's sake I had to let him have a holiday to-day. I am not going over till to-morrow."

"And he thinks you will pass?"

"He seems to think so."

"I wish the time were here now, and that it was all well over," she said. "Oh, I should be so proud, Ronald; and it will be something to speak of to every one; and then—then that will be but the beginning; and day by day I shall be expecting to hear the news. But what a long, long time it seems to look forward to."

"Ay, lass; and it will be worse for you than for me; for there will be the continual trying and hoping for me, and for you nothing but the weary waiting. Well——"

"Oh, but do you think I am afraid?" she said bravely. "No. I have faith in you, Ronald. I know you will do your best."

"I should deserve to be hanged and buried in a ditch if I did not," said he. "But we will leave all that for a while, Meenie; I want you to come for a stroll along the banks over the Kelvin. Would ye wonder to find some sea-gulls flying about?—they're there, though; or they were there a week or two ago. And do you know that I got a glimpse of you at the railway station on Wednesday morning?——"

"I did not see you, Ronald," she said, with some surprise.

"No, no; I kept out o' the way. It's not for me, lass, it's for you to say when any of your folk are to be told what we are looking forward to; and for my part I would as lief wait till I could put a clearer plan before them—something definite."

"And that is my opinion too, Ronald," she answered, in rather a low voice. "Let it be merely an understanding between you and me. I am content to wait."

"Well, then," said he, as they reached the top of the high bank overhanging the river, and began to make their way down the narrow little pathways cut through the trees and shrubs, "here is a confession: I was so glad to see you on that morning—and so glad to see you looking so well—that I half lost my senses, I think; I went away through the streets in a kind o' dream; and, sure as I'm here, I walked into a public-house and ordered a glass of whisky——"

She looked up in sudden alarm,

"No, no, no," said he contentedly, "you need not fear that, my good lassie; it was just that I was bewildered with having seen ye, and thinking of where ye were going. I walked out o' the place without touching it. Ay, and what think ye o' Dunoon? And what kind of a day was it when ye got out on the Firth?"

So she began to tell him of all her adventures and experiences; and by this time they had got down near to the water's edge; and here—of what value would his knowledge of forestry have been otherwise?—he managed to find a seat for her. They were quite alone here—the brown river before them; several sea-gulls placidly paddling on its surface, others flying and dipping overhead; and if this bank of the stream was in shadow, the other—with some small green meadows backed by clumps of elms and maples—was bright and fair enough in the yellow autumn sunshine. They were in absolute silence, too, save for the continual soft murmur of the water, and the occasional whirring by of a blackbird seeking safety underneath a laurel bush.

"Meenie," said he, putting one hand on her shoulder, "here are some verses I copied out for ye last night—they're not much worth—but they were written a long time ago, when little did I think I should ever dare to put them into your hand."

She read them; and there was a rose colour in her face as she did so: not that she was proud of their merit, but because of the revelation they contained.

"A long time ago?" she said, with averted eyes—but her heart was beating warmly.

"Oh," he said, "there are dozens and dozens of similar things, if ever ye care to look at them. It was many a happy morning on the hill, and many a quiet night at home, they gave me; but somehow, lass, now that I look at them, they hardly seem to grip ye fast enough. I want something that will bind ye closer to myself—something that ye can read when you are back in the Highlands—something that is known only to our two selves. Well, now, these things that I have written from time to time—you're a long way off in them somehow—the Meenie that's in them is not this actual Meenie, warm and kind and generous and breathing——"

"And a little bit happy, Ronald, just at present," she said, and she took his hand.

"And some day, when I get through with busier work, I must try to write you something for yourself——"

"But, Ronald, all these pieces you speak of belong to me," she said promptly, "and I want them, every one—every, every one. Yes, and I specially want that letter—if you have not kept it, then you must remember it, and write it out for me again——"

"I came across it last night," said he, with an embarrassed laugh. "Indeed I don't wonder you were angry."

"I have told you before, Ronald, that I was not angry," she said, with a touch of vexation. "Perhaps I was a little—a little frightened—and scarcely knowing how much you meant——"

"Well, you know now, Meenie dear; but last night, when I was going over those scraps of things, I can tell you I was inclined to draw back. I kept saying to myself—'What! is she really going to see herself talked about in this way?' For there's a good deal of love-making in them, Meenie, and that's a fact; I knew I could say what I liked, since no one would be any the wiser, but, last night, when I looked at some of them, I said—'No; I'm not going to provoke a quarrel with Meenie. She would fling things about, as the American used to say, if she saw all this audacious song-writing about her.'"

"I'll chance that quarrel, Ronald," she answered to this, "for I want every, every, every one of them; and you must copy them all, for I am going to take them with me when I leave Glasgow."

"And, indeed," said he, "you'll understand them better in the Highlands; for they're all about Ben Loyal, and the Mudal, and Loch Naver, and Clebrig."

"And to think you hid them from me all that time!"

"Why, Meenie darling, you would have called on the whole population to drive me out of the place if I had shown them to you. Think of the effect produced by a single glance at one of them!—you tortured me for weeks wondering how I had offended you."

"Well, you can't offend me now, Ronald, *that way*," said she, very prettily.

And so their lovers' talk went on, until it was time for Meenie to think of returning home. But just beyond these Botanic Gardens, and down in a secluded nook by the side of the river, there is a little spring that is variously known as the Three-Tree Well and the Pear-Tree Well. It is a limpid little stream, running into the Kelvin; it rises in a tiny cavern and flows for a few yards through a cleft in the rocks. Now these rocks, underneath the overarching trees, have been worn quite smooth (except where they are scored with names) by the footsteps of generation after generation of lovers who, in obedience to an old and fond custom, have come hither to plight their troth while joining hands over the brooklet. Properly the two sweethearts, each standing on one side, ought to join their hands on a Bible as they vow their vows, and thereafter should break a sixpence in twain, each carrying away the half; but these minor points are not necessary to the efficacy of this probably pagan rite. And so—supposing that Ronald had heard of this place of sacred pilgrimage, and had indeed discovered its whereabouts in his rambles around Glasgow—and supposing him to have got a friendly under-gardener to unlock a gate in the western palisades of the Gardens—and then, if he were to ask Meenie to step down to the river-side and walk along to the hallowed well? And yet he made of it no solemn ceremony; the morning was bright and clear around them; and Meenie was rather inclined to smile at the curious old custom. But she went through it nevertheless; and then he stept across the rill again; and said he—

"There's but this remaining now, Meenie darling—'Ae fond kiss and then we sever.'"

She stepped back in affright.

"Ronald, not with that song on your lips! Don't you remember what it goes on to say?"

"Well, I don't," he answered good-naturedly; for he had quoted the phrase at random.

"Why, don't you remember?—

'Had we never loved sae kindly,
Had we never loved sae blindly,
Never met—or never parted,
We had ne'er been broken-hearted.'"

"My good-hearted lass," said he, interlinking his arm with hers, "ye must not be superstitious. What's in a song? There'll be no severance betwixt you and me—the Pear-Tree Well has settled that."

"And that is not at all superstition?" said she, looking up with a smile—until she suddenly found her blushing face overshadowed.

CHAPTER XL.

THE COMING OF TROUBLES.

THESE were halcyon days. Those two had arrived at a pretty accurate understanding of the times of each other's comings and goings; and if they could snatch but five minutes together, as he was on his way over to the south, well, that was something; and not unfrequently the lingering good-bye was lengthened out to a quarter of an hour; and then again when high fortune was in the ascendant, a whole golden hour was theirs—that was as precious as a year of life. For their hastily-snatched interviews the most convenient and secret rendezvous was Hill Street, Garnet Hill; a quiet little thoroughfare, too steep for cabs or carriages to ascend. And very cheerful and bright and pleasant this still neighbourhood looked on those October mornings; for there was yet some crisp and yellow foliage on the trees; and the little patches of green within the railings lay warm in the light; and on the northern side of the street the house-fronts were of a comfortable sunny gray. Ordinarily there were so few people about that these two could walk hand in hand, if they chose; or they could stand still, and converse face to face, when some more than usually interesting talk was going forward. And it was quite astonishing what a lot of things they had to say to each other, and the importance that attached to the very least of them.

But one piece of news that Meenie brought to these stolen interviews was by no means insignificant: she was now receiving marked attentions from a young Glasgow gentleman —attentions that her sister had perceived at a very early period, though Meenie had striven to remain blind to them.

Nor was there anything very singular in this. Mr. Gemmill was exceedingly proud of his pretty sister-in-law; he had asked lots of people to the house for the very purpose of meeting her; she was the centre of interest and attraction at these numerous gatherings; and what more natural than that some susceptible youth should have his mind disturbed by an unwitting glance or two from those clear Highland eyes? And what rendered this prospect so pleasing to the Gemmills was this: the young man who had been stricken by these unintentional darts was no other than the only son of the founder of the firm in which Mr. Gemmill was a junior partner—the old gentleman having retired from the business some dozen years before, carrying with him a very substantial fortune indeed, to which this son was sole heir. In more ways than one this match, if it were to be a match, would be highly advantageous; and Mrs. Gemmill, while saying little, was secretly rejoiced to see everything going on so well. If Meenie chanced to ask what such and such a piece was (Mr. Frank Lauder played a little), even that slight expression of interest was inevitably followed by her receiving the sheet of music by post next morning. Flowers, again: one cannot very well refuse to accept flowers; they are not like other gifts; they may mean nothing. Then, it was quite remarkable how often he found himself going to the very same theatre or the very same concert that the Gemmills had arranged to take Meenie to; and naturally—as it chanced he had no one going with him—he asked to be allowed to go with them. He even talked of taking a seat in Maple Street Church (this was the church that the Gemmills attended), for he said that he was tired to death of the preaching of that old fogey, Dr. Teith, and that Mr. Smilie's last volume of poems (Mr. Smilie was the Maple Street Church minister) had aroused in him a great curiosity to hear his sermons.

And as for Mr. Frank Lauder himself—well, he was pretty much as other young Glasgow men of fashion; though, to be sure, these form a race by themselves, and a very curious race too. They are for the most part a good-natured set of lads; free and generous in their ways; not anything like the wild Lotharios which, amongst themselves, they profess to be; well dressed; a little lacking in repose of manner;

many of them given to boating and yachting—and some of them even expert seamen; nearly all of them fond of airing a bit of Cockney slang picked up in a London music hall during a fortnight's visit to town. But their most odd characteristic is an affectation of knowingness—as if they had read the book of nature and human nature through to the last chapter; whereas these well-dressed, good-natured, but rather brainless young men are as innocently ignorant of that book as of most other books. Knowing but one language—and that imperfectly—is no doubt a bar to travel; but surely nowhere else on the face of the globe could one find a set of young fellows—with similar opportunities set before them—content to remain so thoroughly untutored and untravelled; and nowhere else a set of youths who, while professing to be men of the world, could show themselves so absolutely unversed in the world's ways. But they (or some of them) understand the lines of a yacht; and they don't drink champagne as sweet as they used to do; and no doubt, as they grow into middle age, they will throw aside the crude affectations of youth, and assume a respectable gravity of manner, and eventually become solid and substantial pillars of the Free, U.P., and Established Churches.

This Frank Lauder was rather a favourable specimen of his class; perhaps, in his extreme desire to ingratiate himself with Meenie, he assumed a modesty of demeanour that was not quite natural to him. But his self-satisfied jocosity, his mean interpretation of human motives, his familiarly conventional opinions in all matters connected with the arts, could not always be hidden beneath this mask of meekness; and Meenie's shrewd eyes had discerned clearly of what kind he was at a very early period of their acquaintance. For one thing, her solitary life in the Highlands had made of her a diligent and extensive reader; while her association with Ronald had taught her keen independence of judgment; and she was almost ashamed to find how absolutely unlettered this youth was, and how he would feebly try to discover what her opinion was, in order to express agreement with it. That was not Ronald's way. Ronald took her sharply to task when she fell away from his standard—or rather their conjoint standard—in some of

her small preferences. Even in music, of which this young gentleman knew a little, his tastes were the tastes of the mob.

"Why do you always get away from the room when Mr. Lauder sits down to the piano?" her sister said, with some touch of resentment.

"I can endure a little Offenbach," she answered saucily, "when I'm strong and in good health. But we get a little too much of it when he comes here."

Of course Ronald was given to know of these visits and of their obvious aim; but he did not seem very deeply concerned.

"You know I can't help it, Ronald," she said, one morning, as they were slowly climbing the steep little Randolph Terrace together, her hand resting on his arm. "I can't tell him to go away while my sister keeps asking him to the house. They say that a girl can always show by her manner when any attention is displeasing to her. Well, that depends. I can't be downright rude—I am staying in my sister's house. And then, I wouldn't say he was conceited—I wouldn't say that, Ronald—but—but he is pretty well satisfied with himself; and perhaps not so sensitive about one's manner towards him as some might be. As for you, Ronald," she said, with a laugh, "I could send you flying, like a bolt from a bow, with a single look."

"Could you, lass?" said he. "I doubt it. Perhaps I would refuse to budge. I have got charge of you now."

"Ah, well, I am not likely to try, I think," she continued. "But about this Mr. Lauder, Ronald—you see, he is a very important person in Mr. Gemmill's eyes; for he and his father have still some interest in the warehouse, I suppose; and I know he thinks it is time that Mr. Gemmill's name should be mentioned in the firm—not mere "Co." And that would please Agatha too; and so they're very polite to him; and they expect me to be very polite to him too. You see, Ronald, I can't tell him to go away until he says something—either to me or to Agatha; and he won't take a hint, though he must see that I would rather not have him send flowers and music and that; and then, again, I sometimes think it is not fair to you, Ronald, that I should allow any-

thing of the kind to go on—merely through the difficulty of speaking——"

He stopped, and put his hand over the hand that lay on his arm: there was not a human being in sight.

"Tell me this, Meenie darling: does his coming to the house vex you and trouble you?"

"Oh no—not in the least," said she, blithely and yet seriously. "I am rather pleased when he comes to the house. When he is there of an evening, and I have the chance of sitting and looking at him, it makes me quite happy."

This was rather a startling statement, and instantly she saw a quick, strange look in his eyes.

"But you don't understand, Ronald," she said placidly, and without taking away her eyes from his. "Every time I look at him I think of you, and it's the difference that makes me glad."

Halcyon days indeed; and Glasgow became a radiant golden city in this happy autumn time; and each meeting was sweeter and dearer than its predecessor; and their twin lives seemed to be floating along together on a river of joy. With what a covetous care she treasured up each fragment of verse he brought her, and hid it away in a little thin leathern case she had herself made, so that she could wear it next her heart. He purchased for her little presents—such as he could afford—to show her that he was thinking of her on the days when they could not meet; and when she took these, and kissed them, it was not of their pecuniary value she was thinking. As for her, she had vast schemes as to what she was going to make for him when she got back to the Highlands. Here, in Glasgow, nothing of the kind was possible. Her sister's eyes were too sharp, and her own time too much occupied. Indeed, what between the real lover, who was greedy of every moment she could spare for these secret interviews, and the pseudo lover, who kept the Queen's Crescent household in a constant turmoil of engagements and entertainments and visits, Rose Meenie found the hours sufficiently full; and the days of her stay in Glasgow were going by rapidly.

"But Scripture saith, an ending to all fine things must be;" and the ending, in this case, was the work of the

widow Menzies. Kate felt herself at once aggrieved and perplexed by Ronald's continued absence; but she was even more astonished when, on sending to make inquiries, she found he had left his lodgings and gone elsewhere, leaving no address. She saw a purpose in this; she leapt to the conclusion that a woman had something to do with it; and in her jealous anger and mortification she determined on leaving no stone unturned to discover his whereabouts. But her two cronies, Laidlaw and old Jaap (the skipper was away at sea again), seemed quite powerless to aid her. They knew that Ronald occasionally used to go over to Pollokshaws; but further than that, nothing. He never came to the Harmony Club now; and not one of his former companions knew anything about him. Old Mr. Jaap hoped that no harm had come to the lad, whom he liked; but Jimmy Laidlaw was none so sorry over this disappearance: he might himself have a better chance with the widow, now that Kate's handsome cousin was out of the way.

It was Kate herself who made the discovery, and that in the simplest manner possible. She and mother Paterson had been away somewhere outside the town for a drive; and they were returning by the Great Western Road, one evening towards dusk, when all at once the widow caught sight of Ronald, at some distance off, and just as he was in the act of saying good-bye to a woman—to a young girl apparently. Kate pulled up the cob so suddenly that she nearly pitched her companion headlong into the street.

"What is it, Katie dear?"

She did not answer; she let the cob move forward a yard or two, so as to get the dog-cart close in by the pavement; and then she waited—watching with an eager scrutiny this figure that was now coming along. Meenie did not notice her; probably the girl was too busy with her own thoughts; but these could not have been sad ones, for the bright young face, with its tender colour rather heightened by the sharpness of the evening air, seemed happy enough.

"Flying high, he is," was Kate Menzies's inward comment as she marked the smart costume and the well-bred air and carriage of this young lady.

And then, the moment she had passed, Kate said quickly—

"Here, auntie, take the reins, and wait here. Never mind how long. He'll no stir; if you're feared, bid a laddie stand by his head."

"But what is't, Katie dear?"

She did not answer; she got down from the trap; and then, at first quickly, and afterwards more cautiously, she proceeded to follow the girl whom she had seen parting from Ronald. Nor had she far to go, as it turned out. Meenie left the main thoroughfare at Melrose Street—Kate Menzies keeping fairly close up to her now; and almost directly after was standing at the door of her sister's house in Queen's Crescent, waiting for the ringing of the bell to be answered. It needed no profound detective skill on the part of Mrs. Menzies to ascertain the number of the house, so soon as the girl had gone inside; and thereafter she hurried back to the dog-cart, and got up, and continued her driving.

"Well, that bangs Banagher!" she said, with a loud laugh, as she smartly touched the cob with the whip. "The Great Western Road, of a' places in the world! The Great Western Road—and he goes off by the New City Road—there's a place for twa lovers to forgather!

"We'll meet beside the dusky glen, on yon burn side,
Where the bushes form a cosie den, on yon burn side."

But the Great Western Road—bless us a', and the laddie used to write poetry!"

"But what is it, Katie?"

"Why, it's Ronald and his lass, woman: didna ye see them? Oh ay, he's carried his good looks to a braw market—set her up wi' her velvet hat and her sealskin coat, and living in Queen's Crescent forbye. Ay, ay, he's ta'en his pigs to a braw market——"

"It's no possible, Katie dear!" exclaimed mother Paterson, who affected to be very much shocked. "Your cousin Ronald wi' a sweetheart?—and him so much indebted to you——"

"The twa canary birds!" she continued, with mirth that sounded not quite real. "But never a kiss parting, wi' a' they folk about. And that's why ye've been hiding yourself away, my lad? But I jalouse that that braw young

leddy o' yours would laugh the other side of her mouth if her friends were to find out her pranks."

And indeed that was the thought that chiefly occupied her mind during the rest of the drive home. Arrived there, she called for the Post-Office Directory, and found that the name of the people living in that house in Queen's Crescent was Gemmill. She asked her cronies, when they turned up in the evening, who this Gemmill was; but neither of them knew. Accordingly, being left to her own resources, and without letting even mother Paterson know, she took a sheet of paper and wrote as follows—

"SIR—Who is the young lady in your house who keeps appointments with Ronald Strang, formerly of Inver-Mudal? Keep a better look-out. Yours, A Friend."

And this she enclosed in an envelope, and directed it to Mr. Gemmill of such and such a number, Queen's Crescent, and herself took it to the post. It was a mere random shot, for she had nothing to go upon but her own sudden suspicions; but she was angry and hot-headed; and in no case, she considered, would this do any harm.

She succeeded far better than she could have expected. Mr. Gemmill handed the anonymous note to his wife with a brief laugh of derision. But Agatha (who knew more about Ronald Strang than he) looked startled. She would not say anything. She would not admit to her husband that this was anything but an idle piece of malice. Nevertheless, when Mr. Gemmill left for the city, she began to consider what she should do.

Unfortunately, as it happened that morning, Meenie just played into her sister's hand.

"Aggie dear, I am going along to Sauchiehall Street for some more of that crimson wool: can I bring you anything?"

"No, thank you," she said; and then instantly it occurred to her that she would go out and follow her sister, just to see whether there might be any ground for this anonymous warning. It certainly was a strange thing that any one should know that Meenie and Ronald Strang were even acquainted.

And at first—as she kept a shrewd eye on the girl, whom she allowed to precede her by some distance—all seemed

to go well. Meenie looked neither to the right nor to the left as she walked, with some quickness, along St. George's Road towards Sauchiehall Street. When she reached the wool shop and entered, Mrs. Gemmill's conscience smote her—why should she have been so quick to harbour suspicions of her own sister? But she would still watch her on the homeward way—just to make sure.

When Meenie came out again from the shop she looked at her watch; and it was clear that she was now quickening her pace as she set forth. Why this hurry, Mrs. Gemmill asked herself?—the girl was not so busy at home. But the solution of the mystery was soon apparent. Meenie arrived at the corner of Hill Street; gave one quick glance up the quiet little thoroughfare; the next moment Mrs. Gemmill recognised well enough—for she had seen him once or twice in the Highlands—who this well-built, straight-limbed young fellow was who was now coming down the steep little street at such a swinging pace. And Meenie went forward to meet him, with her face upturned to his; and she put her hand on his arm quite as if that were her familiar custom; and away these two went—slowly, it is true, for the ascent was steep—and clearly they were heeding not anything and not anybody around.

Agatha turned away and went home; she had seen enough. To say that she was deeply shocked would hardly be true; for there are very few young women who have not, at some time or other in their lives, made an innocent little arrangement by which they might enjoy an unobserved interview with the object of their choice; and, if there are any such extremely proper young persons, Agatha Gemmill knew that she had not been in the category herself. But she was resolved upon being both indignant and angry. It was her duty. There was this girl wilfully throwing away all the chances of her life. A gamekeeper!—that her sister should be for marrying a gamekeeper just at the time that Mr. Gemmill expected to have his name announced as a partner in the great firm! Nay, she made no doubt that Meenie had come to Glasgow for the very purpose of seeking him out. And what was to become of young Frank Lauder? Indeed, by the time Meenie returned

home, her sister had succeeded in nursing up a considerable volume of wrath; for she considered she was doing well to be angry.

But when the battle-royal did begin, it was at first all on one side. Meenie did not seek to deny anything. She quite calmly admitted that she meant to marry Ronald, if ever their circumstances should be so favourable. She even confessed that she had come to Glasgow in the hope of seeing him. Had she no shame in making such an avowal?—no, she said, she had none; none at all. And what had she meant by encouraging Mr. Lauder?—she had not encouraged him in any way, she answered; she would rather have had none of his attentions.

But it was when the elder sister began to speak angrily and contemptuously of Ronald that the younger sister's eyes flashed fire and her lips grew pale.

"A gentleman?" she retorted. "I might marry a gentleman? I tell you there is no such gentleman—in manner, in disposition, in education—I say there is no such gentleman as he is comes to this house!"

"Deary me!" said Agatha sarcastically, but she was rather frightened by this unwonted vehemence. "To think that a gamekeeper——"

"He is not a gamekeeper! He will never be a gamekeeper again. But if he were, what should I care? It was as a gamekeeper that I learnt to know him. It was as a gamekeeper that I gave him my love. Do you think I care what occupation he follows when I know what he is himself?"

"Hoity-toity! Here's romance in the nineteenth century!—and from you, Meenie, that were always such a sensible girl! But I'll have nothing to do with it. Back you pack to the Highlands, and at once; that's what I have got to say."

"I am quite willing to go back," the girl said proudly.

"Ah, because you think you will be allowed to write to him; and that all the fine courting will go on that way; and I've no doubt you're thinking he's going to make money in Glasgow—for a girl as mad as you seem to be will believe anything. Well, don't believe *that*. Don't believe you will have any fine love-making in absence, and all that

kind of stuff. Mother will take good care. I should not wonder if she sent you to a school in Germany, if the expense were not too great—how would you like that?"

"But she will not."

"Why, then?"

"Because I will not go."

"Here's bravery! I suppose you want something more heroic—drowning yourself because of your lost love—or locking yourself up in a convent to escape from your cruel parents—something that will make the papers write things about you? But I think you will find a difference after you have been two or three months at Inver-Mudal. Perhaps you will have come to your senses then. Perhaps you will have learnt what it was to have had a good prospect of settling yourself in life—with a respectable well-conducted young man—of good family—the Lauders of Craig themselves are not in the least ashamed that some of the family have been in business—yes, you will think of that, and that you threw the chance away because of an infatuation about a drunken ne'er-do-weel——"

"He is not—he is not!" she said passionately; and her cheeks were white; but there was something grasping her heart, and like to suffocate her, so that she could not protest more.

"Anyway, I will take care that I shall have nothing to do with it," the elder sister continued; "and if you should see him again before you go, I would advise you to bid him good-bye, for it will be the last time. Mother will take care of that, or I am mistaken."

She left the room; and the girl remained alone—proud and pale and rebellious; but still with this dreadful weight upon her heart, of despair and fear that she would not acknowledge. If only she could see Ronald! One word from him—one look—would be enough. But if this were true?—if she were never to be allowed to hear from him again?—they might even appeal to himself, and who could say what promise they might not extract from him, if they were sufficiently cunning of approach? They might say it was for her welfare—they might appeal to his honour—they might win some pledge from him—and she knowing nothing of it all! If only she could see him for one moment!

The very pulses of her blood seemed to keep repeating his name at every throb—yearning towards him, as it were; and at last she threw herself down on the sofa and buried her head in the cushion, and burst into a wild and long-continued fit of weeping and sobbing. But this in time lightened the weight at her heart, at any rate; and when at length she rose—with tear-stained cheeks and tremulous lips and dishevelled hair—there was still something in her look that showed that the courage with which she had faced her sister was not altogether gone; and soon the lips had less of tremulousness about them than of a proud decision; and there was that in the very calmness of her demeanour that would have warned all whom it might concern that the days of her placid and obedient girlhood were over.

CHAPTER XLI.

IN OTHER CLIMES.

NEVER was there a gayer party than this that was walking from the hotel towards the shores of Lake George, on a brilliant and blue-skied October morning. Perhaps the most demure—or the most professedly demure—was Miss Carry Hodson herself, who affected to walk apart a little; and swung carelessly the fur cape she carried in her hand; and refused all kinds of attentions from a tall, lank, long-haired young man who humbly followed her; and pretended that she was wholly engrossed with the air of

> "*I'm in love, sweet Mistress Prue,*
> *Sooth I can't conceal it;*
> *My poor heart is broke in two—*
> *You alone can heal it.*"

As for the others of this light-hearted and laughing group of young folk, they were these: Miss Kerfoot, a fresh-coloured, plump, pleasant-looking girl, wearing much elaborate head-gear rather out of proportion to her stature; her married sister, Mrs. Lalor, a grass-widow who was kind enough to play chaperon to the young people, but whose effective black eyes had a little trick of roving on their own account—perhaps merely in quest of a joke; Dr. Thomas P. Tilley,

an adolescent practitioner, who might have inspired a little more confidence in his patients had he condescended to powder his profuse chestnut-brown hair; and, finally, the long and lank gentleman who waited so humbly on Miss Hodson, and who was Mr. J. C. Huysen, of the *Chicago Citizen*. Miss Carry had at length—and after abundant meek intercession and explanations and expressions of remorse—pardoned the repentant editor for his treatment of Ronald. It was none of his doing, he vowed and declared. It was some young jackass whom the proprietors of the paper had introduced to him. The article had slipped in without his having seen it first. If only her Scotch friend would write something more, he would undertake that the *Chicago Citizen* would treat it with the greatest respect. And so forth. Miss Carry was for a long time obdurate, and affected to think that it was poetical jealousy on his part (for the lank-haired editor had himself in former days written and published sentimental verse—a fact which was not forgotten by one or two of the wicked young men on the staff of the *N. Y. Sun* when Mr. Huysen adventured into the stormy arena of politics); but in the end she restored him to favour, and found him more submissive than ever. And in truth there was substantial reason for his submission. The *Chicago Citizen* paid well enough, no doubt; but the editor of that journal had large views; and Miss Hodson's husband—if all stories were true—would find himself in a very enviable position indeed.

"Mayn't I carry your cape for you, Miss Hodson?" the tall editor said, in the most pleading way in the world.

"No, I thank you," she answered, civilly enough; but she did not turn her head; and she made believe that her mind was wholly set on

> *"I'm in love, sweet Mistress Prue,*
> *Sooth I can't conceal it."*

This timid prayer and its repulse had not escaped the sharp observation of Miss Kerfoot.

"Oh," said she, "there's no doing anything with Carry, ever since we came to Fort George. Nothing's good enough for her; the hills are not high enough; and the place is not wild enough; and there's no catching of salmon

in drenching rain—so there's no amusement for her. Amusement? I know where the trouble is; I know what amusement she wants; I know what makes her grumble at the big hotels, and the decent clothes that people prefer to wear, and the rattlesnakes, and all the rest. Of course this lake can't be like the Scotch lake; there isn't a handsome young gamekeeper here for her to flirt with. Flirtation, was it? Well, I suppose it was, and no more. I don't understand the manners and customs of savage nations. Look at her now. Look at that thing on her head. I've heard of girls wearing true-love knots, and rings, and things of that kind, to remind them of their sweethearts; but I never heard of their going about wearing a yellow Tam-o'-Shanter."

Miss Carry smiled a superior smile; she would pay no heed to these ribald remarks; apparently she was wholly engrossed with

"I'm in love, sweet Mistress Prue."

"It isn't fair of you to tell tales out of school, Em," the young matron said.

"But I wasn't there. If I had been, there would have been a little better behaviour. Why, I never! Do you know how they teach girls to use a salmon-rod in that country?"

The question was addressed to Mr. Huysen; but Miss Kerfoot's eyes were fixed on Miss Carry.

"No, I don't," he answered.

"Oh, you don't know," she said. "You don't know. Really. Well, I'll tell you. The gamekeeper—and the handsomer the better—stands overlooking the girl's shoulder; and she holds the rod; and he grips her hand and the rod at the same time."

"But I know how," the young Doctor interposed. "See here—give me your hand—I'll show you in a minute."

"Oh no, you shan't," said she, instantly disengaging herself; "this is a respectable country. We don't do such things in New York State. Of course, over there it's different. Oh yes; if I were there myself—and—and if the gamekeeper was handsome enough—and if he asked me to have a lesson in salmon-fishing—don't you think I would go? Why, I should smile!"

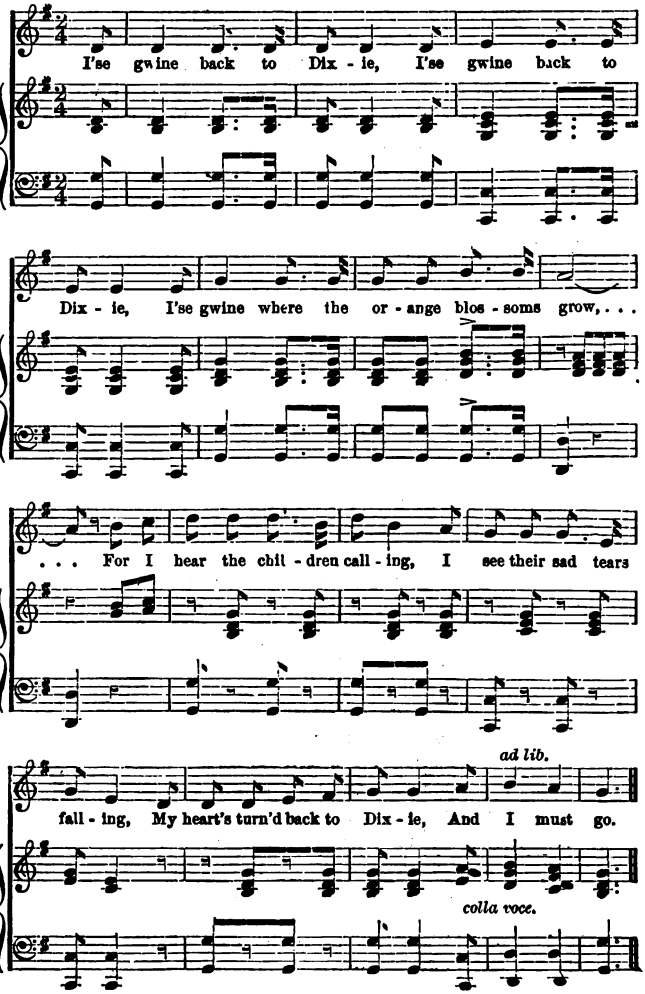
But here Miss Carry burst out laughing; for her friend had been caught. These two girls were in the habit of talking the direst slang between themselves (and occasionally Miss Carry practised a little of it on her papa), but this wickedness they did in secret; outsiders were not supposed to know anything of that. And now Dr. Tilley did not seem very much pleased at hearing Miss Kerfoot say "I should smile"; and Miss Kerfoot looked self-conscious and amused and a little embarrassed; and Carry kept on laughing. However, it all blew over; for now they were down at the landing stage; and presently the Doctor was handing them into the spick and span new cat-boat that he had just had sent through from New York that autumn.

Indeed it was a right joyous party that now went sailing out on the clear lapping waters; for there was a brisk breeze blowing; and two pairs of sweethearts in one small boat's cargo make a fair proportion; and Lake George, in October, before the leaves are beginning to fall, is just about as beautiful a place as any one can want. The far low hills were all red and brown and yellow with maple and scrub oak, except where the pines and the hemlocks interposed a dark blue-green; and nearer at hand, on the silvery surface of the lake, were innumerable small wooded islands, with a line of white foam along the windward shores; and overhead a perfectly cloudless sky of intense and brilliant blue. And if these were not enough for the gay voyagers, then there were other things—laughter, sarcasm, subtle compliments, daring or stolen glances; until at last the full tide of joy burst into song. Who can tell which of them it was that started

"I'se gwine back to Dixie, no more I'se gwine to wander,
My heart's turned back to Dixie, I can't stay here no longer"?

No matter; nor was it of much consequence whether the words of the song were of a highly intellectual cast, nor whether the music was of the most distinguished character, so long as there was a chorus admirably adapted for soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. It was very speedily clear that this was not the first time these four had practised the chorus (Mrs. Lalor was allowed to come in just where she pleased),

nor was there any great sadness in their interpretation of the words—



It is impossible to say how often they repeated the chorus; until Mrs. Lalor asked the girls why they were so fond of singing about orange blossoms, and then presently they turned to something else.

All this time they were beating up against a stiff but steady head-wind; the Doctor at the tiller; the lank editor standing by the mast at the bow; the girls and their chaperon snugly ensconced in the capacious cock-pit, but still having to dodge the enormously long boom when the boat was put about. The women-folk, of course, paid no attention to the sailing; they never do; they were quite happy in leaving the whole responsibility on the owner of the craft; and were entirely wrapped up in their own petty affairs. Nay, so recklessly inconsiderate were they that they began to be angry because Dr. Tilley would not get out his banjo—which was in the tiny cabin, or rather locker, at the bow. They wanted to sing "Dancing in the Barn," they said. What was the use of that without a banjo to play the dance music?

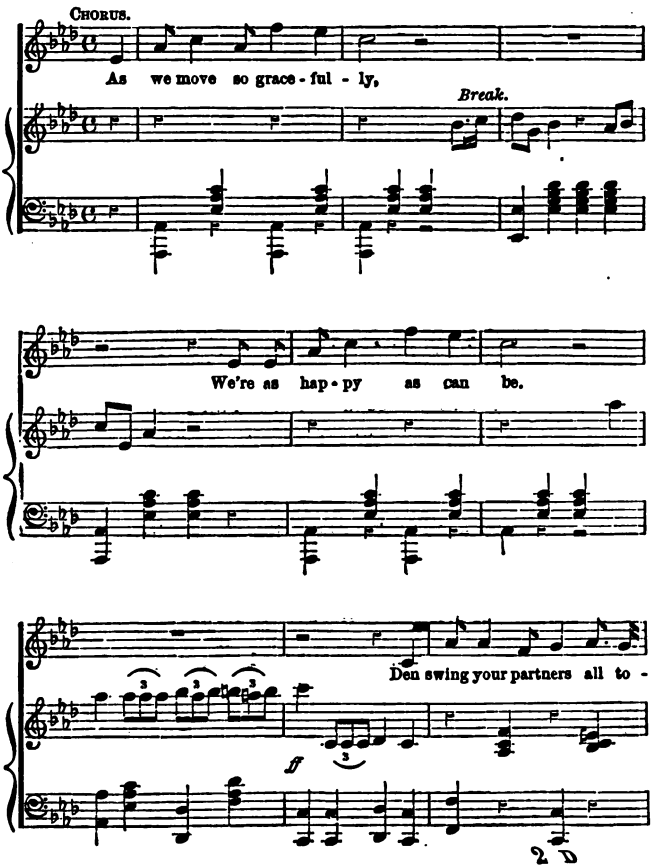
"Very well," said the complaisant Doctor, "we'll run into some quiet creek in one of the islands; and then I'll see what I can do for you."

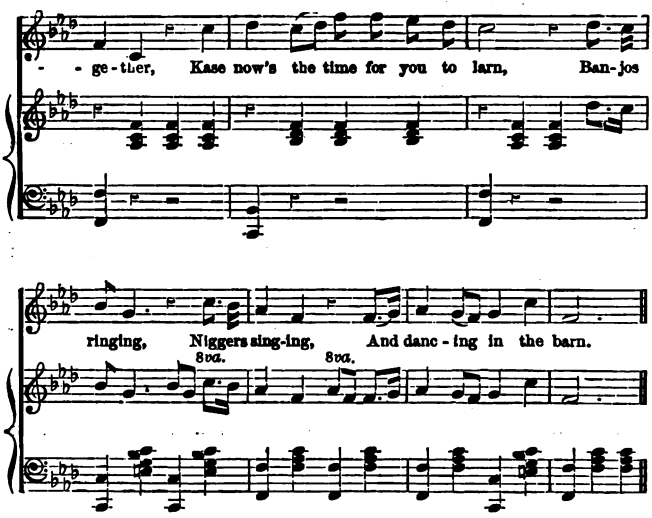
No, no, they said; they wanted to sing sailing; they did not wish to go ashore, or near the shore. Well, the amiable Doctor scarce knew how to please them, for he could not steer the boat and play the banjo at the same time; and he was not sure about entrusting the safety of so precious a cargo to the uncertain seamanship of the editor. However, they were now a long way from Fort George; they might as well take a run back in that direction; and so—the boat having been let away from the wind and put on a fair course for the distant landing-stage—Mr. Huysen was called down from the bow and directed as to how he should steer; and then the Doctor went forward and got out the banjo.

Now this "Dancing in the Barn" (the words are idiotic enough) has a very catching air; and no sooner had the Doctor—who was standing up on the bit of a deck forward, where Jack Huysen had been—begun the tinkling prelude than the girls showed little movements of hands and feet, as if they were performing an imaginary "cake-walk."

"Oh, we'll meet at the ball in the evening,
Kase I love to pass the time away"

—they were all singing at it now; they did not wait for any chorus; and Miss Carry had caught Miss Em's hand, and was holding it on high, and keeping time to the music, as if she were in reality leading her down the barn.





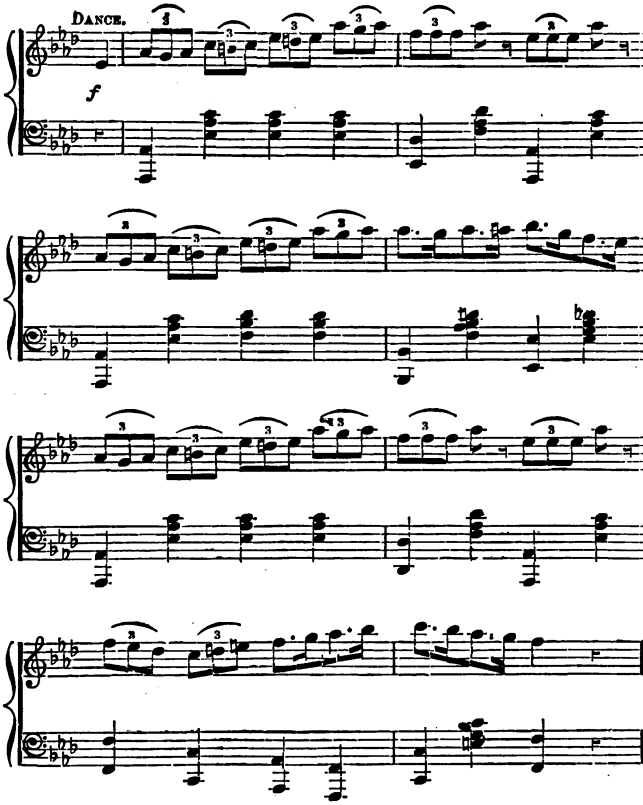
Then came in the rippling dance—played as a solo on the banjo ; and so catching was it that the two girls stood up, and made believe to dance a little. You see, the boat was running free before the wind, and there was scarcely any appreciable motion, though she was going at a good speed, for her mainsail was enormously large and the breeze was brisk.

"I say, Huysen," the Doctor called, while he was playing the dance, "look what you're about. Never mind the singing. Keep her bow straight for the landing-stage."

Then the next verse began—

"Den we's off to work in de morning,
Singing as we go out to de field,"

and they all went at it with a will. And then the chorus; and then the light rippling dance—



and the two girls were on their feet again, making believe to posture a little, while the sharp clear notes of the banjo tinkled and tinkled, amid the steady swishing noise of the water along the side of the boat. But all of a sudden there was a startled cry of warning—the banjo was dropped on the deck, and the Doctor sprung aft in a vain effort to check what he had seen was coming; the next moment the great boom came heavily swinging along, accelerating its pace as it went out to leeward, until there was a frightful

crash that seemed to tear the whole craft to pieces. And then, in this wild lurch, what had happened? Tilley was the first to see. There was something in the water. He tore off his coat and slipped over the boat's side—heeding nothing of the piercing screams of those he had left, but shaking the wet from his eyes and nose and mouth, and looking all around him like a Newfoundland dog. Then he caught sight of a small floating object—some dozen yards away—and he made for that: it was the yellow Tam-o'-Shanter, he could see; then he heard a half-stifled cry just behind him, and turning round was just able to catch hold of Carry Hodson before she sank a second time. However, she was quite passive—perhaps she had been stunned by a blow from the boom; and he was an excellent swimmer; and he could easily keep her afloat—if only Jack Huysen knew enough about sailing to get the boat back speedily. It was in vain to think of swimming with her to the shore; the land was too far off; and the weight of her wet clothes was increasing. He looked after the boat; it seemed a terrible distance away; but as far as he could make out—through the water that was blinding his eyes—they had got her round into the wind again and were no doubt trying to make for him.

Meanwhile, Jack Huysen had been so thunderstruck by what had occurred, when his own carelessness or an awkward gust of wind had caused the great boom to gybe, that for some seconds he seemed quite paralysed, and of course all this time the little craft was swinging along before the breeze. The shrieks of the women bewildered him, moreover. And then it occurred to him that he must get back—somehow, anyhow; and more by instinct than of knowledge he jammed down the helm, and rounded the boat into the wind, where the big sail began to flop about with the loose mainsheet dragging this way and that. And then he set about trying little experiments—and in a frantic nervousness all the same; he knew, or he discovered, that he must needs get in the mainsheet; and eventually the boat began to make uncertain progress—uncertain, because he had been terrified, and was afraid to keep proper way on her, so that she staggered up into the wind incessantly. But this at all events kept them near the course they had

come; and from time to time she got ahead a bit; and the women had ceased their shrieking, and had subsided, the one into a terrified silence, the other into frantic weeping and clasping of her hands.

"Can't you—can't you look out? Why don't you look out for them?" he cried, though he scarce knew what he said, so anxious was he about the tiller and those puffs of wind that made the boat heel over whenever he allowed the sail to fill.

And then there was a cry—from Mrs. Lalor.

"Look—look—this way—you're going away from them."

He could only judge by the direction of her gaze; he put the boat about. She began to laugh, in a hysterical fashion.

"Oh yes, yes, we are getting nearer—we are getting nearer—he sees us—Em, Em, look!—poor Carry!—Oh, quick, quick with the boat—quick, quick, quick!"

But the wringing of her hands was of little avail; and indeed when they did eventually draw cautiously close to the two people in the water, the business of getting them dragged on board proved a difficult and anxious matter, for the girl was quite unconscious and lay in their hands like a corpse. The young Doctor was very much exhausted too; but at least he preserved his senses. He sat down for a minute to recover his breath.

"Jack," he gasped, "put my coat round her—wrap her warm—Mrs. Lalor, get off her boots and stockings—chafe her feet and hands—quick."

And then he rose and went to where she was lying and stooped over her.

"Yes, yes, her heart is beating—come away with that coat, man."

But it was his own coat that Jack Huysen had quickly taken off; and when Carry Hodson was wrapped in it, and when the women were doing what they could to restore her circulation, he fetched the other coat for the young Doctor, and made him put that on, though the latter declared he was all right now. And then the Doctor took the tiller, slacked out the mainsheet, and once more they were running before the wind towards Fort George. Not a word had been said about the cause of the mishap or its possible consequences,

These at first—and to Jack Huysen's inexpressible joy—seemed to be trivial enough. Immediately she had recovered consciousness she sate up, and began to say a few words—though with some difficulty; and indeed, so brave was she, and so determined to do something to relieve the obvious anxiety of these good friends of hers, that when at length they reached the landing-stage and got ashore she declared that she was quite recovered, that she could walk to the hotel as well as any of them, that she had never felt better in her born days. Nay, she made a joke of the whole matter, and of her heavy skirts, and of the possible contents of Jack Huysen's coat-pockets; and when they did reach the hotel, and when she had changed her wet garments, she came down again looking perfectly well—if a little bit tired.

It was not until the afternoon that she began to complain of shiverings; and then again, when dinner time arrived, Mrs. Lalor came down with the message that Carry had a slight headache, and would rather remain in her room. Next morning, too, she thought she would rather not get up; she had a slight cough, and her breathing was difficult; she had most relief when she lay quite still.

"What does this mean, Tom?" Jack Huysen said—and as if he feared the answer.

"I hope it means nothing at all," was the reply; but the young Doctor looked grave, and moved away as if he did not wish to have any further talking.

However, there was no perceptible change for the worse that day; and Miss Carry, when she could speak at all, said that she was doing very well, and implored them to go away on their usual excursions, and leave her to herself. A servant might sit outside in the passage, she said; if she wanted her, she could ring. Of course, this only sufficed to set Emma Kerfoot into a fit of weeping and sobbing—that Carry should think them capable of any such heartlessness.

But on the following morning matters were much more serious. She could hardly speak at all; and when she did manage to utter a few panting words she said it was a pain in her chest that was troubling her—not much; no, no, not much, she said; she wished they would all go away and

amuse themselves; the pain would leave; she would be all right by and by.

"Jack, look here," said the young Doctor, when they were together; "I'm afraid this is pneumonia—and a sharp attack too."

"Is it dangerous?" Huysen said quickly, and with rather a pale face.

The answer to this was another question:

"She left her mother at home, didn't she?"

"Yes," said he breathlessly. "Do you want to send for her? But that would be no use. Her mother could not travel just now; she's too much of an invalid; why, it was she who sent Carry away on this holiday."

"Her father, then?"

"Why, yes, he's at home just now. Shall I telegraph for him?"

"No—not yet—I don't want to frighten her. We'll see in the morning."

But long before the morning came they discovered how things were going with her. Late that night Mrs. Lalor, who had undertaken to sit up till her sister should come to relieve her, stole noiselessly along to the room of the latter and woke her.

"Em, darling, who is Ronald?" she whispered.

"Ronald? I don't know," was the answer—for she was still somewhat confused.

"Carry is asking that one Ronald should be sent for—do come and see her, Em—I think she's wandering a little—she says there's never any luck in the boat except when Ronald is in it—I don't understand it at all——"

"But I do—I do now," said the girl, as she hastily got up and put a dressing-gown and some wraps around her. "And you'll have to send for the Doctor at once, Mary—he said he would not be in bed till two. She must be in a fever—that's delirium—if she thinks she is in the Highlands again."

And delirium it was, though of no violent kind. No, she lay quite placidly; and it was only at times that she uttered a few indistinct words; but those around her now perceived that her brain had mixed up this Lake George with that other Scotch lake they had heard of, and they

guessed that it was about salmon-fishing she was thinking when she said that it was Ronald that always brought good luck to the boat.

CHAPTER XLII.

A CHALLENGE.

On the evening of the day on which Agatha Gemmill had made her portentous discovery about the secret interviews between her sister and Ronald, Mr. Gemmill—a little, red-headed man with shrewd blue eyes—came home in very good spirits.

"Look here, Aggie—here's an invitation for you," he was beginning—when he saw that something was wrong. "What is it now?" he asked.

And then the story was told him—and not without a touch of indignation in the telling. But Mr. Gemmill did not seem so horror-stricken as his wife had expected; she began to emphasise the various points; and was inclined to be angry with him for his coolness.

"Girls often have fancies like that—you know well enough, Agatha," he said. "All you have to do is to take a gentle way with her, and talk common sense to her, and it will be all right. If you make a row, you will only drive her into obstinacy. She will listen to reason; she's not a fool; if you take a quiet and gentle way with her——"

"A quiet and gentle way!" his wife exclaimed. "I will take no way with her at all—not I! I'm not going to have any responsibility of the kind. Back she goes to the Highlands at once—that's all the way I mean to take with her. See, there's a letter I've written to mother."

"Then you mean to make a hash of this affair amongst you," said he, with calm resignation. "You will merely drive the girl into a corner; and her pride will keep her there——"

"Oh yes, men always think that women are so easily persuaded," his wife broke in. "Perhaps you would like to try arguing with her yourself? But, any way, I wash my hands of the whole matter. I shall have her packed off home at once,"

"I don't think you will," the husband said quietly. "I was going to tell you: the Lauders are giving a big dinner-party on the 27th—that is a fortnight hence; and here is an invitation for the three of us; and Frank Lauder as good as admitted this morning that the thing was got up for the very purpose of introducing Meenie to the old folk. Well, then, I have already written and accepted; and I will tell you this—I'm not going to offend the old gentleman just because you choose to quarrel with your sister."

"Quarrel?" she retorted. "Oh yes—she never can do any wrong. She has made a fool of you with her pretty eyes—as she does to every man that comes to the house. Why, they're like a set of great babies when she's in the room; and you would think from the way they go on that she was the Queen of Sheba—instead of the ill-tempered little brat she is."

But Mrs. Gemmill was a sensible woman too.

"Of course we can't offend the old people. She'll have to stay. But as soon as that is over, off she goes to the Highlands again; and there she can stop until she has recovered her senses."

However, this invitation was but an additional grievance. She went with it at once to Meenie's room.

"Look at that. Read that."

The girl glanced at the formal note—with no great interest.

"Do you know what that means? That was meant to introduce you to Frank Lauder's family and friends."

"I do not wish to go," Meenie said perversely.

"But you'll have to go, for we have accepted for you. We can't offend and insult people simply because you are bent on making a fool of yourself. But this is what I want to say: I had intended sending you back to Inver-Mudal at once; but now you will have to stay with us another fortnight. Very well, during that time I forbid you to have any communication with that man, of any kind whatever—do you hear?"

She sate silent.

"Do you hear?"

"Yes, I hear," she said.

"Well?"

"Very well."

"But it is not very well," the elder sister said angrily. "I want to know what you mean to do."

The answer was given with perfect calmness.

"I mean to do precisely as I have been doing. I am not ashamed of anything I have done."

"What? You are not ashamed? Do you mean to tell me that you will keep on meeting that man—in the public streets—making a spectacle of yourself in the streets of Glasgow—and bringing disgrace on yourself and your family?"

"You are talking like a mad woman," Meenie said proudly.

"You will see whether I act like one. I say you shall not be allowed to misconduct yourself while you are under this roof—that I will make sure of."

"What will you do?" the girl said, in a strangely taunting tone: indeed, one could scarcely have believed that this was Meenie that was speaking. "Lock me up in my room? they only do that in books. Besides, Mr. Gemmill would prevent your doing anything so ridiculous."

"Oh, it's *he* that would come to let you out?" the elder sister said. "You've discovered that, have you? What more, I wonder!"

But here the scene, which threatened to become more and more stormy, came to a sudden end. There was a sharp call from below—Mr. Gemmill having doubtless overheard some of these wild words.

"Agatha, come downstairs at once!"

So the girl was left once more alone—proud and pale and trembling a little, but with her mind more obdurate than ever. Nor would she go down to supper that night. Mr. Gemmill went twice to the door of her room (his wife would not budge a foot) and begged her to come downstairs. The first time she said she did not wish for any supper. The second time she said that if her conduct had been so disgraceful she was not fit to associate with his family. And so, being by nature a kindly-hearted man, he went away and got some food for her, and carried the little tray to her room with his own hands—a proceeding that only made his wife the angrier. Why should she be spoilt

and petted with such foolish indulgence? Starvation was the best cure for her pride. But of course he was like the rest of the men—made simpletons of by a pair of girl's gray eyes.

Alas! all her pride and courage went from her in the long dark hours of the night, and her sister's threat assumed a more definite and terrible meaning. It was true she had a fortnight's respite—during that fortnight she was her own mistress and could do as she pleased—[illegible]? Would she be shut up in that little hamlet in the northern wilds, with absolutely no means of learning anything about Ronald, not permitted to mention his name, [illegible] him as though he were in another world? [illegible] after month go by—or year after year [illegible] or message coming to keep alive the [illegible] breast. He might even be dead [illegible] And how all too short this fortnight seemed [illegible] she might still have some chance of seeing [illegible] from him some assurance with regard to a [illegible] looked more than ever uncertain and vague.

The next day it had been arranged between them that they were not to meet, for he was to be at home all that day and busy; but her anxiety was too great [illegible] to go to his lodgings and ask for him. [illegible] done that before; but now the crisis was [illegible] her heed what any one might say [illegible] think for a moment about it. [illegible] about the house, performing such small [illegible] entrusted to her, and wondering when [illegible] leave off. At last, about noon, when [illegible] no sign of clearing, she got her [illegible] put on a thick pair of boots and [illegible] umbrella, went out into the black and [illegible] one had attempted to hinder her.

And yet it was with some curious sense of [illegible] she timidly rang the bell when she [illegible] lodgings. The door was in a [illegible] who answered the summons [illegible] cheeks were unusually flushed when [illegible] Ronald Strang were at home.

"Yes, he is," the woman said [illegible]

apparently not quite knowing whether she should ask the young lady to step in or not.

"Will you tell him that I should like to see him for a moment—here!" she said.

In less than a minute Ronald was with her—and he had brought his cap in his hand; for he had guessed who this was; and instinctively he knew that he could not ask her to come within doors. But when she said she had something to say to him, and turned to face the dismal day outside, he could not but glance at the swimming pavements and the murky atmosphere.

"On such a morning, Meenie——"

"Oh, but I am well wrapped up," she said, quite happily—for the mere sight of him had restored her courage, "and you shall have the umbrella—yes—I insist—take it—well, then, I ask you to take it as a favour, for I am not going to have you get wet on my account."

Of course he took the umbrella—to hold over her; and so they went out into the wet streets.

"I am so glad to see you, Ronald," she said, looking up with a face that told its own story of joy and confidence; "don't blame me; I have been miserable; I could not help coming to ask you for a little—a little comfort, I think, and hope——"

"But what have you been doing to your eyes, Meenie, darling? What kind of a look is that in them?"

"Well, I cried all last night—all the night through, I believe," said she simply; but there was no more crying in her eyes, only light and love and gladness. "And now, the moment I see you I think I must have been so foolish. The moment I see you everything seems right; I am no longer afraid; my heart is quite light and hopeful again."

"Ay, and what has been frightening you, then?"

And then she told him all the story—as they walked along the wet pavements, with the bedraggled passers-by hurrying through the rain, and the tramway-cars and omnibuses and carts and cabs keeping up their unceasing roar. But Agatha's threats were no longer so terrible to her—now that she had hold of Ronald's arm; she glanced up at him from time to time with eyes full of courage and confidence; a single glimpse of him had driven away all

these dire spectres and phantoms. Indeed, if the truth were known, it was he who was most inclined to take this news seriously; though, of course, he did not show that to her. No; he affected to laugh at the idea that they could be kept from communicating with each other: if she were to be sent back to Inver-Mudal, he said, that was only anticipating what must have happened in any case; it would no doubt be a pity to miss these few stolen minutes from time to time; but would not that be merely a spur to further and constant exertion?

"Ay, lass," said he, "if I could have any reasonable and fair prospect to put before them, I would just go to your friends at once; but all the wishing in the world, and all the work in the world, will not make next spring come any the quicker; and until I'm a certificated forester I'm loth to bother Lord Ailine, or anybody else, about a place. But what o' that? It's not a long time; and unless Mr. Weems is making a desperate fool o' me, I've a good chance; and Lord Ailine will do his best for me among his friends, that I know well. In the meantime, if they will not let you write to me——"

"But, Ronald, how can they help my writing to you, or coming to see you, if I wish?"

"I was not thinking of your sister and her folk," he answered—and he spoke rather gravely. "I was thinking of your father and mother. Well, it is not a nice thing for a young lass to be in opposition to her own folk: it's a sore trouble to both sides; and though she may be brave enough at first, time will tell on her—especially when she sees her own father and mother suffering through her defiance of them."

"Then I am not to write to you, Ronald, if they say no?" she asked quickly, and with her face grown anxious again.

Well, it was a difficult question to answer off-hand; and the noise in the streets bothered him; and he was terribly troubled about Meenie having to walk through the rain and mud.

"Will you do this for me, Meenie?" he said. "I cannot bear to have ye getting wet like this. If we were to get into an omnibus, now, and go down the town, I know a restaurant where we could go in and have a comfortable

corner, and be able to talk in peace and quiet. You and I have never broken bread together, quite by ourselves. Will you do that?"

She did not hesitate for a moment.

"Yes—if you think so—if you wish it," she said.

And so they went down to the restaurant, which was rather a big place, cut into small compartments; and one of these they had to themselves, for it was but half-past twelve as yet; and by and by a frugal little lunch was before them. The novelty of the situation was so amusing—to Meenie at least—that for a time it drove graver thoughts away altogether. She acted as mistress of the feast; and would insist on his having this or that; and wondered that he had never even tasted Worcester sauce; and was altogether tenderly solicitous about him; whereas he, on the other hand, wished not to be bothered by any of these things, and wanted only to know what Meenie meant to do when she went back to Inver-Mudal.

"But you must tell me what you would have me do," she said timidly.

"Well, I don't want you to quarrel with your mother and father on my account, and be living in constant wretchedness. If they say you are not to write to me, don't write——"

"But you said a little while ago there would be no difficulty in our hearing from each other," she said, with wide open eyes.

"I have been thinking about it, good lass," said he, "and I don't want you to anger your folk and have a heavy heart in consequence. In the meantime you must look to them—you must do what they say. By and by it may be different; in the meantime I don't want you to get into trouble——"

"Then it's little you know how this will end, Ronald," she said, rather sadly. "I have thought over it more than you have. If I go back to Inver-Mudal prepared to do everything they wish me to do—I mean my mother, not my father, for I don't know what he might say—then it isn't only that you will never hear from me, and that I shall never hear a word from you; there's more than that: I shall never see you again in this world."

He turned very pale; and, scarcely knowing what he did, he stretched his hand over the narrow little table, and seized her hand, and held it firm.

"I will not let you go, then. I will keep you here in Glasgow, with me, Meenie. Do you think I can let you go away for ever? For you are mine. I don't care who says ay or no; you are mine; my own true-hearted girl; the man or woman is not born that will sunder us two."

Of course he had to speak in a low tone; but the grip of his hand was sufficient emphasis. And then he said, regarding her earnestly and yet half-hesitatingly—

"There is one way that would give you the right to judge what was best for yourself—that would give you the right to act or say what you pleased—even to leave your father's house, if that was necessary. Will you become my wife, Meenie, before you go back to Inver-Mudal?"

She started, as well she might; but he held her hand firm.

"The thing is simple. There is my brother the minister. We could walk over to his house, go through the ceremony in a few minutes, and you could go back to your sister's, and no one be a bit the wiser. And then surely you would be less anxious about the future; and if you thought it right to send me a letter, you would be your own mistress as to that——"

"It's a terrible thing, Ronald!"

"I don't see that, Meenie, dear; I've heard of more than one youug couple taking their fate in their own hand that way. And there's one thing about it—it 'maks sikker.'"

They had some anxious talk over this sudden project—he eager, she frightened—until the restaurant began to get crowded with its usual middle-day customers. Then Ronald paid his modest score, and they left; and now, as they made away for the western districts of the city, the day was clearing up somewhat, and at times a pale silvery gleam shone along the wet pavements. And still Meenie was undecided; and sometimes she would timidly steal a glance at him, as if to assure herself and gain courage; and sometimes she would wistfully look away along this busy Sauchie-

hall Street, as if her future and all the coming years were somehow at the end of it. As for him, now that he had hit upon this daring project, he was eager in defence of it; and urged her to give her consent there and then; and laboured to prove to her how much happier she would be at Inver-Mudal—no matter what silence or space of time might interpose between them—with the knowledge that this indissoluble bond united them. Meenie remained silent for the most part, with wistful eyes; but she clung to his arm as if for protection; and they did not hasten their steps on their homeward way.

When they parted she had neither said yes nor no; but she had promised to write to him that night, and let him know her decision. And in the morning, he got this brief message—the handwriting was not a little shaky, but he had scarcely time to notice that, so rapid was the glance he threw over the trembling lines :—

"Dear Ronald—If it can be done quite, quite secretly —yes. "L. M."

The signature, it may be explained, consisted of the initials of a pet name that he had bestowed on her. She had found it first of all in some of those idle verses that he now copied out for her from time to time; and she had asked him how he had dared to address her in that way, while as yet they were but the merest acquaintances. However, she did not seem very angry.

CHAPTER XLIII.

A WEDDING.

This golden-radiant city of Glasgow!—with its thousand thousand activities all awakening to join the noise and din of the joyous morning, and its over-arching skies full of a white light of hope and gladness and fair assurance of the future. The clerks and warehousemen were hurrying by to their desks and counters; work-folk were leisurely getting home for their well-earned breakfast; smart young men and slim-waisted women were already setting the shop windows

to rights; great lorries were clattering their loads of long iron bars through the crowded streets; and omnibuses and tramway-cars and railway-trains were bringing in from all points of the compass their humming freight of eager human bees to this mighty and dusky hive. But dusky it did not appear to him, as he was speedily making his way across the town towards his brother's house. It was all transfigured and glorified—the interminable thoroughfares, the sky-piercing chimneys, the masses of warehouses, the overhead network of telegraph-lines, the red-funnelled steamers moving slowly away through the pale blue mist of the Broomielaw: all these were spectral in a strange kind of way, and yet beautiful; and he could not but think that the great mass of this busy multitude was well content with the pleasant morning, and the nebulous pale-golden sunlight, and the glimpses of long cirrus cloud hanging far above the city's smoke. For the moment he had ceased to hang his happiness on the chance of his succeeding with the Highland and Agricultural Society. Something far more important—and wonderful—was about to happen. He was about to secure Meenie to himself for ever and ever. Not a certificate in forestry, but Meenie's marriage-lines—that was what would be in his pocket soon! And after?—well, the long months, or even years, might have to go by; and she might be far enough away from him, and condemned to silence—but she would be his wife.

And then, just as he had reached the south side of the river, he paused—paused abruptly, as if he had been struck. For it had suddenly occurred to him that perhaps, after all, this fine project was not feasible. He had been all intent on gaining Meenie's acquiescence; and, having got that, had thought of nothing but winning over the Reverend Andrew into being an accomplice; but now he was quickly brought up by this unforeseen obstacle—could Meenie, not being yet twenty-one, go through even this formal ceremony without the consent of her parents? It seemed to him that she could not—from his reading of books. He knew nothing of the marriage law of Scotland; but it appeared to him, from what he could recollect of his reading, that a girl under twenty-one could not marry without her parents' consent. And this was but the letting in of waters. There

were all kinds of other things—the necessity of having lived a certain time in this or that parish; the proclamation of banns—which would be merely an invitation to her relatives to interfere; and so on. He resumed his walk; but with less of gay assurance. He could only endeavour to fortify himself with the reflection that in the one or two instances of which he had heard of this very thing being done the young people had been completely successful and had kept their secret until they judged the time fitting for the disclosing of it.

When he reached his brother's house, the Reverend Andrew was in his study, engaged in the composition of the following Sunday's sermon; he was seated at a little table near the fire; a pot of tea on the chimney-piece; a large Bible and Cruden's Concordance lying open on the sofa beside him. The heavy, bilious-hued man rose leisurely, and rubbed his purplish hands, and put them underneath his coat-tails, as he turned his back to the fire, and stood on the hearth-rug, regarding his brother.

"Well, Ronald, lad, ye're not frightened for a cold morning, to come out with a jacket like that."

"The morning's well enough," said Ronald briefly; and forthwith he laid before his brother the errand on which he had come, and besought his assistance, if that were practicable. He told the story simply and concisely; not pleading any justification; but rather leaving the facts to speak for themselves. And would his brother help?—in other words, supposing there were no other obstacle in the way, would Andrew perform this ceremony for them, and so render their future proof against all contingencies? He was not asked for any advice; he was not asked to assume any responsibility; would he merely exercise this clerical function of his on their behalf—seeing how urgent matters were?

The Reverend Andrew was very much puzzled, not to say perturbed. He began to walk up and down the room; his head bent forward, his hands still underneath his coat-tails.

"You put me in a box, Ronald, and that's a fact," said he. "I'm thinking my wishes as a brother will be for setting themselves up against my duty as a minister of the

Gospel. For I dare not counsel any young girl to defy the authority of her own people——"

"She has not asked you for any counsel," Ronald said curtly. "And besides we don't know what the authority might be. I dare say, if her father knew all the circumstances, he would be on our side; and I suppose he has as much right to speak as her little spitfire of a mother."

This was hard on Mrs. Douglas, who had always treated Ronald with courtesy—if of a lofty and distant kind; but impetuous young people, when their own interests are at stake, are seldom just to their elders. However, the Reverend Andrew now began to say that, if he were altogether an outsider, nothing would give him greater pleasure than to see this wish of his brother's accomplished. He had observed much, he said; he had heard more; he knew the saving influence that this girl had exercised on Ronald's life; he could pray for nothing better than that these two should be joined in lawful bonds, towards the strengthening of each other, and the establishment of a mutual hope and trust.

"But it would never do for me to be mixed up in it, Ronald," he continued. "When it came to be known, think of what ill-minded folk might say. I must have regard to my congregation as well as to myself; and what if they were to accuse me of taking part in a conspiracy?"

"A conspiracy?" Ronald repeated sharply. "What kind of a conspiracy? To steal away a rich heiress—is that it? God bless me, the lass has nothing beyond what she stands up in! There's the sealskin coat Glengask gave her; they can have that back, and welcome. What conspiracy would ye make out?"

"No, no, lad; I'm thinking what ill tongues might say."

"Let them lick their own venom till they rot! What care I?"

"Yes, yes, yes, lad; but ye're not a placed minister; ye've but yourself and her to think of. Now, just wait a bit."

He had gone back to his chair by the fire, and was seated there, staring into the red coals.

"I suppose you've heard of Dugald Mannering, of Airdrie?" he said, at length.

"Yes, indeed," was the answer. "Meenie—that is—Miss Douglas and I went to hear him the Sunday before last, but there was not a seat to be got anywhere—no, nor standing-room either."

This Mr. Mannering was a young divine of the U.P. Church who had an extraordinary popularity at this time among the young people of the south of Scotland, and especially the young people of Glasgow, and that from a variety of causes. He was a singularly eloquent preacher—flowing, ornate, and poetical; he was entirely unconventional, not to say daring, in his choice of subjects; his quotations were as commonly from Shakespeare and Coleridge and Byron and Browning as from the usual pulpit authorities; he was exceedingly handsome, and rather delicate-looking—pale and large-eyed and long-haired; and he had refused the most flattering offers—"calls" is the proper word—from various west-end congregations of Glasgow, because he considered it his duty to remain among the mining-folk of Airdrie. When he did accept an invitation to preach in this or that city church, the young people from far and near came flocking to hear him; and a good many of their elders too, though these were not without certain prickings of conscience as to the propriety of devoting the Lord's day to what was remarkably like a revel in pure literature.

"Dugald's coming over here this afternoon," the elder brother continued, as if he were communing with himself. "He's an enthusiastic kind of fellow—he'll stick at nothing, if he thinks it's right. I wish, now, I had that portrait—but Maggie's away to school by this time——"

"What portrait?" Ronald asked.

The Reverend Andrew did not answer, but rose, and slowly and thoughtfully left the room. When he came back he had in his hand a photograph of Meenie framed in a little frame of crimson velvet, and that he put on the table: Ronald recognised it swiftly enough.

"He has got an eye for a handsome young lass, has Dugald," the minister said shrewdly. "I'll just have that lying about, as it were. Ay, it's a straightforward, frank face, that; and one that has nothing to hide. I'll just have it lying about when Dugald comes over this after-

noon, and see if he doesna pick it up and have a good look at it."

"But what mean ye, Andrew?" his brother said.

"Why, then, lad, I think I'll just tell Dugald the whole story; and if he's not as hot-headed as any of ye to carry the thing through, I'll be surprised. And I suppose if he marries ye, that's just as good as any one else?—for to tell you the truth, Ronald, I would rather not be mixed up in it myself."

"And the banns?" said Ronald quickly. "And the length of time in the parish? And the consent of her mother and father?"

The minister waved his hand with a superior air; these were trivial things, not to say popular errors; what had been of real consequence was the extent to which he dared implicate himself.

"I will not say," he observed slowly, "that I might not, in other circumstances, have preferred the publication of banns. It would have been more in order, and more seemly; for I do not like the interference of the secular arm in what should be a solely sacred office. Besides that, there is even a premium put on publicity, as is right; five shillings for the one proclamation, but only half-a-crown if you have them proclaimed two following Sundays. Well, well, we mustn't complain; I see sufficient reason; from all I can learn—and you were ever a truth-teller, Ronald, in season and out of season, as well I mind—it seems to me you are fulfilling the laws of God, and breaking none of man's making; so just you go to the Registrar of the parish, and give him the particulars, and deposit a half-crown as the worthy man's fee, and then, eight days hence, you call on him again, and he'll give you a certificate entitling you to be married in any house or church in the Kingdom of Scotland. And if there's no other place handy, ye're welcome to the room you're standing in at this minute; though I would as lief have the marriage take place anywhere else, and that's the truth, Ronald; for although I can defend what little I have done to my own conscience, I'm no sure I should like to stand against the clishmaclavers of a lot of old wives."

"Where am I to find the Registrar, Andrew?" he asked.

he was a little bewildered by the rapidity with which this crisis seemed approaching.

"I suppose you've a good Scotch tongue in your head, and can ask for the loan of a Directory," was the laconic answer. The Reverend Andrew had taken up the photograph again, and was regarding it. "An honest, sweet face; as pretty a lass as ever a man was asked to work and strive for and to win. Well, I do not wonder, Ronald, lad—with such a prize before you—— But off you go now, for I must get to my work again; and if you come over and have a cup of tea in the afternoon, between four and five, I suppose Dugald Mannering will be here, and maybe ye'll be the best hand to explain the whole situation of affairs."

And so Ronald left to seek out the Registrar; and as he went away through the busy and sunlit streets, he was asking himself if there was not one of all those people who could guess the secret that he carried with him in his bosom, and that kept his heart warm there.

The Rev. Dugald Mannering, as it turned out, was not nearly so eager and enthusiastic as Ronald's brother had prophesied; for it behoves a youthful divine to maintain a serious and deliberative countenance, when weighty matters are put before him for judgment. But afterwards, when the two young men were together walking away home through the dusky streets of Glasgow, the U.P. minister became much more frank and friendly and communicative.

"I see your brother's position well enough, Mr. Strang," said he. "I can understand his diffidence; and it is but right that he should be anxious not to give the envious and ill-natured a chance of talking. He is willing to let the ceremony take place in his house, because you are his brother. If I were you, I would rather have it take place anywhere else—both as being fairer to him, and as being more likely to ensure secrecy, which you seem to think necessary."

Ronald's face burned red: should he have to ask Meenie to come to his humble lodgings, with the wondering, and perhaps discontented and suspicious, landlady, as sole onlooker?

"Well, now," the young preacher continued, "when I come to Glasgow, there are two old maiden aunts of mine

who are good enough to put me up. They live in Rose Street, Garnethill; and they're very kind old people. Now I shouldn't wonder at all if they took it into their head to befriend the young lady on this occasion—I mean, if you will allow me to mention the circumstances to them; indeed, I am sure they would; probably they would be delighted; indeed I can imagine their experiencing a fearful joy on finding this piece of romance suddenly tumbling into the middle of their prim and methodical lives. The dear old creatures!—I will answer for them. I will talk to them as soon as I get home now. And do you think you could persuade Miss Douglas to call on them?"

Ronald hesitated.

"If they were to send her a message, perhaps——"

"When are you likely to see her?"

"To-morrow morning, at eleven," he said promptly.

"Very well. I will get one of the old ladies to write a little note to Miss Douglas; and I will post it to you to-night; and to-morrow morning, if she is so inclined, bring her along and introduce yourself and her—will you? I shall be there, so there won't be any awkwardness; and I would not hurry you, but I've to get back to Airdrie to-morrow afternoon. Is it a bargain?"

"So far as I am concerned—yes; and many thanks to ye," Ronald said, as he bade his companion good-bye and went away home to his solitary lodgings.

But when, the next morning, in Randolph Terrace—and after he had rapidly told her all that had happened—he suggested that she should there and then go along and call on the Misses Mannering, Meenie started back in a kind of fright, and a flush of embarrassment overspread her face. And why—why—he asked, in wonder.

"Oh, Ronald," she said, glancing hurriedly at her costume, "these—these are the first of your friends you have asked me to go to see, and do you think I could go like *this?*"

"*This*" meant that she had on a plain and serviceable ulster, a smart little hat with a ptarmigan's wing on it, a pair of not over-new gloves, and so forth. Ronald was amazed. He considered that Meenie was always a wonder of neatness and symmetry, no matter how she was attired. And to think that any one might find fault with her!

"Besides, they're not my friends," he exclaimed. "I never saw them in my life."

"They know who your brother is," she said. "Do you think I would give any one occasion to say you were marrying a slattern? Just look."

She held out her hands; the gloves were certainly worn.

"Take them off, and show them the prettiest-shaped hands in Glasgow town," said he.

"And my hair—I know it is all rough and untidy—isn't it now?" she said, feeling about the rim of her hat.

"Well, it is a little," he confessed, "only it's far prettier that way than any other."

"Ronald," she pleaded, "some other time—on Friday morning—will Friday morning do?"

"Oh, I know what you want," said he. "You want to go and get on your sealskin coat and your velvet hat and a new pair of gloves and all the rest; and do you know what the old ladies are like to say when they see you?—they'll say, 'Here's a swell young madam to be thinking of marrying a man that may have but a couple o' pounds a week or so at first to keep house on.'"

"Oh, will they think that?" she said quickly. "Well, I'll—I'll go now, Ronald—but please make my hair smooth behind—and is my collar all right?"

And yet it was not such a very dreadful interview, after all; for the two old dames made a mighty fuss over this pretty young creature; and vied with each other in petting her, and cheering her, and counselling her; and when the great event was spoken of in which they also were to play a part they affected to talk in a lower tone of voice, as if it were something mysterious and tragic and demanding the greatest caution and circumspection. As for the young minister, he sate rather apart, and allowed his large soft eyes to dwell upon Meenie, with something of wistfulness in his look. He could do so with impunity, in truth, for the old ladies entirely monopolised her. They patted her on the shoulder, to give her courage; they spoke as if they themselves had gone through the wedding ceremony a hundred times. Was she sure she would rather have no other witnesses? Would she stand up at the head of the room now, and they would show her all she would have to do?

And they stroked her hand; and purred about her; and were mysteriously elated over their share in this romantic business; insomuch that they altogether forgot Ronald—who was left to talk politics with the absent-eyed young parson.

Between this interview and the formal wedding a whole week had to elapse; and during that time Agatha Gemmill saw fit to deal in quite a different way with her sister. She was trying reason now, and persuasion, and entreaty; and that at least was more agreeable to Meenie than being driven into a position of angry antagonism. Moreover, Meenie did not seek to vaunt her self-will and independence too openly. Her meetings with Ronald were few; and she made no ostentatious parade of them. She was civil to Mr. Frank Lauder when he came to the house. Indeed, Mr. Gemmill, who arrogated to himself the success of this milder method of treating the girl, was bold enough to declare that everything was going on well; Meenie had as much common sense as most folk; she was not likely to throw herself away; and when once she had seen old Mr. Lauder's spacious mansion, and picture galleries, and what not, and observed the style in which the family lived, he made no doubt but that they would soon have to welcome Frank Lauder as a brother-in-law.

Trembling, flushed at times, and pale at others, and clinging nervously to Ronald's arm, Meenie made her way up this cold stone staircase in Garnethill, and breathless and agitated she stood on the landing, while he rang the bell.

"Oh, Ronald, I hope I am doing right," she murmured.

"We will let the future be the judge of that, my good girl," he said, with modest confidence.

The old dames almost smothered her with their attentions and kindness; and they had a bouquet for her—all in white, as became a bride; and they had prepared other little nick-nacks for her adornment, so that they had to carry her off to their own room, for the donning of these. And when they brought her back—rose-red she was, and timid, and trembling—each of them had one of her hands, as if she was to be their gift to give away; and very important and mysterious were they about the shutting of the

doors, and the conducting the conversation in whispers. Then the minister came forward, and showed them with a little gesture of his hand where they should stand before him.

The ceremonial of a Scotch wedding is of the simplest; but the address to the young people thus entering life together may be just anything you please. And in truth there was a good deal more of poetry than of theology in these mellifluent sentences of the Rev. Mr. Mannering's, as he spoke of the obligations incurred by two young folk separating themselves from all others and resolved upon going through the world's joys and sorrows always side by side; and the old dames were much affected; and when he went on to quote the verses,

> *"And on her lover's arm she leant,*
> *And round her waist she felt it fold,*
> *And far across the hills they went*
> *In that new world which is the old,"*

they never thought of asking whether the lines were quite apposite; they were sobbing unaffectedly and profusely; and Meenie's eyes were rather wet too. And then, when it was all over, they caught her to their arms as if she had been their own; and would lead her to the sofa, and overwhelm her with all kinds of little attentions and caresses. Cake and wine, too—of course she must have some cake and wine!

"Should I, Ronald?" she said, looking up, with her eyes all wet and shining and laughing: it was her first appeal to the authority of her husband.

"As you like—as you like, surely."

But when they came to him he gently refused.

"Not on your wedding day!" the old ladies exclaimed—and then he raised the glass to his lips; and they did not notice that he had not touched it when he put it down again.

And so these two were married now—whatever the future might have in store for them; and in a brief space of time—as soon, indeed, as she could tear herself away from these kind friends, she had dispossessed herself of her little bits of bridal finery; and had bade a long and lingering good-bye to Ronald; and was stealing back to her sister's house.

CHAPTER XLIV.

IN DARKENED WAYS.

It was with feelings not to be envied that Jack Huysen stalked up and down the verandah in front of this Fort George hotel, or haunted the long, echoing corridors, eager to question any one who had access to the sick room. All the mischief seemed to be of his doing; all the help and counsel and direction in this time of distress seemed to be afforded by his friend Tilley. It was he—that is, Huysen—whose carelessness had led to the boating catastrophe; it was the young Doctor who had plunged into the lake and saved Carry's life. Not only that, but it was on his shoulders that there now seemed to rest the burden of saving her a second time; for she had gone from bad to worse; the fever had increased rapidly; and while Doctor Tilley was here, there, and everywhere in his quiet but persistent activity, taking elaborate precautions about the temperature of the room, instructing the two trained nurses whom he had telegraphed for from New York, and pacifying the mental vagaries of the patient as best he might, what could Jack Huysen do but wander about like an uneasy spirit, accusing himself of having wrought all this evil, and desperately conscious that he could be of no use whatever in mitigating its results.

She was not always delirious. For the most part she lay moaning slightly, breathing with the greatest difficulty, and complaining of that constant pain in her chest; while her high pulse and temperature told how the fever was rather gaining upon her than abating. But then again, at times, her face would grow flushed; and the beautiful soft black eyes would grow strangely bright; and she would talk in panting whispers, in an eager kind of way, and as if she had some secret to tell. And always the same delusion occupied her mind—that this was Loch Naver; that they had got into trouble somehow, because Ronald was not in the boat; that they had sent for Ronald, but he had gone away; and so forth. And sometimes she uttered bitter reproaches; Ronald had been ill-treated by some one; nay, she herself had been to blame; and who

was to make up to him for what he had suffered at her hands?

"Not that he cared," she said, rather proudly and contemptuously, one hushed evening that the Doctor was trying to soothe her into quietude. "No, no. Ronald care what a conceited scribbling schoolboy said about him? No! I should think not. Perhaps he never knew—indeed, I think he never knew. He never knew that all our friends in Chicago were asked to look on and see him lectured, and patronised, and examined. Oh! so clever the newspaper-writer was—with his airs of criticism and patronage! But the coward that he was—the coward—to strike in the dark—to sit in his little den and strike in the dark! Why didn't Jack Huysen drag him out? Why didn't he make him sign his name, that we could tell who this was with his braggart airs? The coward! Why, Ronald would have felled him! No! no! He would not have looked the way the poor pretentious fool was going. He would have laughed. Doctor, do you know who he was? Did you ever meet him?"

"But who, Miss Carry?" he said, as he patted her hot hand.

She looked at him wonderingly.

"Why, don't you know? Did you never hear? The miserable creature that was allowed to speak ill of our Ronald. Ah! do you think I have forgotten? Does Jack Huysen think I have forgotten? No, I will not forget—you can tell him, I will not forget—I will not forget—I will not forget—"

She was growing more and more vehement; and to pacify her he had to assure her that he himself would see this matter put straight; and that it was all right, and that ample amends would be made.

Of course, he paid no great attention to these delirious wanderings; but that same evening, when he had gone into the smoking-room to report to Jack Huysen how things were going, this complaint of Miss Carry's happened to recur to his mind.

"Look here, Jack, what's this that she's always talking about—seems to worry her a good deal—some newspaper article—and you're mixed up in it, too—something you

appear to have said or done about that fellow her father took such a fancy for—I mean, when they were in Scotland——"

"Oh, I know," said the editor, and he blushed to the very roots of his long-flowing hair. "I know. But it's an old story. It's all forgotten now."

"Well, it is not," the young Doctor said, "and that's the fact. She worries about it continually. Very strange, now, how her mind just happened to take that bent. I don't remember that we were talking much about the Scotch Highlands. But they must have been in her head when she fell ill; and now it's nothing else. Well, what is it about the newspaper article, anyway?"

"Why, nothing to make a fuss about," Jack Huysen said, but rather uneasily. "I thought it was all forgotten. She said as much. Wonder you don't remember the article—suppose you missed it—but it was about this same Highland fellow, and some verses of his—it was young Regan wrote it—confound him, I'd have kicked him into Lake Michigan before I let him write a line in the paper, if I'd have known there was going to be this trouble about it. And I don't think now there was much to find fault with—I only glanced over it before sending it to her, and it seemed to me favourable enough—of course, there was a little of the *de haut en bas* business—you know how young fellows like to write—but it was favourable—very favourable, I should say—however, she chose to work up a pretty high old row on the strength of it when she came home, and I had my work cut out for me before I could pacify her. Why, you don't say she's at that again? Women are such curious creatures; they hold on to things so; I wonder, now, why it is she takes such an interest in that fellow—after all this time?"

"Just as likely as not the merest coincidence—some trifle that got hold of her brain when she first became delirious," the young Doctor said. "I suppose the boating, and the lake, and all that, brought back recollections of the Highlands; and she seems to have been fascinated by the life over there—the wildness of it caught her imagination, I suppose. She must have been in considerable danger once or twice, I should guess; or perhaps she is mixing

that up with the mishap of the other day. Well, I know I wish her father were here. We can't do more than what is being done; still, I wish he were here. If he can get through to Glen Falls to-night, you may depend on it he'll come along somehow."

By this time Jack Huysen was nervously pacing up and down—there was no one but themselves in the room.

"Now, look here, Tom," he said, presently, "I wish you would tell me, honour bright: was it a squall that caught the boat, or was it downright carelessness on my part? I may as well know. I can't take more shame to myself anyhow—and to let you jump in after her, too, when I'm a better swimmer than you are—I must have lost my head altogether——"

"And much good you'd have done if you had jumped in," the Doctor said, "and left the two women to manage the boat. How should we have got picked up, then?"

"But about that gybing, now—was it my fault?"

"No, it was mine," the Doctor said curtly. "I shouldn't have given up the tiller. Fact is, the girls were just mad about that 'Dancing in the Barn'; and I was fool enough to yield to them. I tell you, Jack, it isn't half as easy as it looks steering a boat that's running fair before the wind; I don't blame you at all; I dare say there was a nasty puff that caught you when you weren't looking; anyhow, it's a blessing no one was hit by the boom—that was what I feared at first for Miss Hodson when I found her insensible—I was afraid she had been hit about the head——"

"And you don't think it was absolute carelessness?" the other said quickly. "Mind, I was steering straight for the pier, as you said."

"Oh, well," said the young Doctor evasively, "if you had noticed in time, you know—or when I called to you—but perhaps it was too late then. It's no use going back on that now; what we have to do now is to fight this fever as well as we can."

"I would take it over from her if I could," Jack Huysen said, "and willingly enough."

It was not until early the next morning that Mr. Hodson

arrived. He looked dreadfully pale and harassed and fatigued; for the fact was he was not in Chicago when they telegraphed for him; some business affairs had called him away to the south; and the news of his daughter's illness followed him from place to place until it found him in a remote corner of Louisiana, whence he had travelled night and day without giving himself an hour's rest. And now he would not stay to dip his hands and face in cold water after his long and anxious journey; he merely asked a few hurried questions of the Doctor; and then, stealthily and on tip-toe, and determined to show no sign of alarm or perturbation, he went into Carry's room.

She had been very delirious during the night—talking wildly and frantically in spite of all their efforts to soothe her; but now she lay exhausted, with the flushed face, and bluish lips, and eager, restless eyes so strangely unlike the Carry of other days. She recognised him at once—but not as a new-comer; she appeared to think he had been there all the time.

"Have you seen him, pappa?" she said, in that eager way. "Did you see him when you were out?"

"Who, darling?" he said, as he sate down beside her and took her wasted hand in his.

"Why, Ronald, to be sure! Oh, something dreadful was about to happen to him—I don't know what it was—something dreadful and dreadful—and I called out—at the window—at the window there—and nurse says it is all right now—all right now——"

"Oh yes, indeed," her father said geutly, "you may depend it is all right with Ronald now. Don't you fret about that."

"Ah, but we neglected him, pappa, we neglected him; and I worst of any," she went on, in that panting, breathless way. "It was always the same—always thinking of doing something for him, and never doing it. I meant to have written to the innkeeper for his address in Glasgow; but no—that was forgotten too. And then the spliced rod, that George was to have got for me—I wanted Ronald to have the best salmon-rod that America could make—but it was all talking—all talking. Ah, it was never talking

with him when he could do us a service—and the other boatmen getting money, of course—and he scarcely a 'thank you' when he came away. Why didn't George get the fishing-rod?——"

"It's all right, Carry, darling," her father said, whispering to her, "you lie quiet now, and get well, and you'll see what a splendid salmon-rod we'll get for Ronald. Not that it would be of much use to him, you see, when he's in Glasgow with his books and studies; but it will show him we have not forgotten him. Don't you trouble about it, now; I will see it is all right; and you will give it to him yourself, if we go over there next spring, to try the salmon-fishing again."

"Then you will take George with you, pappa," she said, regarding him with her burning eyes.

"Oh yes; and you——"

"Not me, not me," she said, shaking her head. "I am going away. The Doctor doesn't know; I know. They have been very kind; but—but—ask them, pappa, not to bother me to take things now—I want to be let alone, now you are here—it will only be for a little while——"

"Why, what nonsense you talk!" he said—but his heart was struck with a sudden fear, for these few straggling sentences she had uttered without any appearance of delirium. "I tell you, you must hasten to get well and strong; for when George and you and I go to Scotland, there will be a great deal of travelling to do. You know we've got to fix on that piece of land, and see how it is all to be arranged and managed, so that George will have a comfortable little estate of his own when he comes of age; or maybe, if it is a pretty place, we may be selfish and keep it in our own hands—eh, Carry?—and then, you see, we shall have to have Ronald travel about with us, to give us his advice: and the weather may be bad, you know, you'll have to brace yourself up. There, now, I'm not going to talk to you any more just now. Lie still and quiet; and mind you do everything the Doctor bids you—why, you to talk like that!—you! I never thought you would give in, Carry: why, even as a schoolgirl you had the pluck of a dozen! Don't you give in; and you'll see if we haven't those two cobles out on Loch Naver before many months are over."

She shook her head languidly; her eyes were closed now. And he was for slipping out of the room but that she clung to his hand for a moment.

"Pappa," she said, in a low voice, and she opened her eyes and regarded him—and surely at this moment, as he said to himself, she seemed perfectly sane and reasonable, "I want you to promise me something."

"Yes, yes," he said quickly: what was it he would not have promised in order to soothe and quiet her mind at such a time?

"I don't know about going with you and George," she said, slowly, and apparently with much difficulty. "It seems a long way off—a long time—and—and I hardly care now what happens. But you will look after Ronald; you must promise me that, pappa; and tell him I was sorry; I suppose he heard the shooting was taken, and would know why we did not go over in the autumn; but you will find him out, pappa, and see what he is doing; and don't let him think we forgot him altogether."

"Carry, darling, you leave that to me; it will be all right with Ronald, I promise you," her father said eagerly. "Why, to think you should have been worrying about that! Oh! you will see it will be all right about Ronald, never fear!—what would you say, now, if I were to telegraph to him to come over and see you, if only you make haste and get well!"

These assurances, at all events, seemed to pacify her somewhat; and as she now lay still and quiet, her father stole out of the room, hoping that perhaps the long-prayed-for sleep might come to calm the fevered brain.

But the slow hours passed, and, so far from any improvement becoming visible, her condition grew more and more serious. The two doctors—for Doctor Tilley had summoned in additional aid—were assiduous enough; but, when questioned, they gave evasive answers; and when Mr. Hodson begged to be allowed to telegraph to a celebrated Boston physician, who was also a particular friend of his own, asking him to come along at once, they acquiesced, it is true, but it was clearly with the view of satisfying Mr. Hodson's mind, rather than with any hope of advantage to the patient. From him, indeed, they scarcely tried to conceal the extreme gravity of the case. Emma Kerfoot and Mrs.

Lalor were quieted with vague assurances; but Mr. Hodson knew of the peril in which his daughter lay; and, as it was impossible for him to go to sleep, and as his terrible anxiety put talking to these friends out of the question, he kept mostly to his own room, walking up and down, and fearing every moment lest direr news should arrive. For they had been much of companions, these two; and she was an only daughter; and her bright, frank, lovable character—that he had watched from childhood growing more and more beautiful and coming into closer communion with himself as year after year went by—had wound its tendrils round his heart. That Carry, of all people in the world, should be taken away from them so, seemed so strange and unaccountable: she that was ever so full of life and gaiety and confidence. The mother had been an invalid during most of her married life; the boy George had not the strongest of constitutions; but Carry was always to the fore with her audacious spirits and light-heartedness, ready for anything, and the best of travelling companions. And if she were to go, what would his life be to him?—the light of it gone, the gladness of it vanished for ever.

That afternoon the delirium returned; and she became more and more wildly excited; until the paroxysm passed beyond all bounds. She imagined that Ronald was in some deadly peril; he was alone, with no one to help; his enemies had hold of him; they were carrying him off, to thrust him into some black lake; she could hear the waters roaring in the dark. It was in vain that the nurse tried to calm her and to reason with her; the wild, frightened eyes were fixed on vacancy; and again and again she made as if she would rush to his help, and would then sink back exhausted and moaning, and heaping reproaches on those who were allowing Ronald to be stricken down unaided. Then the climax came, quite unexpectedly. The nurse—who happened at the moment to be alone with her in the room—went to the side-table for some more ice; and she was talking as she went; and trying to make her charge believe that everything was going on well enough with this friend of hers in Scotland. But all of a sudden, when the nurse's back was thus turned, the girl sprang from the bed and rushed to the window. She tore aside the curtains

that had been tied together to deaden the light; she tugged and strained at the under sash; she was for throwing herself out—to fly to Ronald's succour.

"See, see, see!" she cried, and she wrenched herself away from the nurse's frightened grasp. "Oh, don't you see that they are killing him—they are killing him—and none to help! Ronald—Ronald! Oh, what shall I do? Nurse, nurse, help me with the window—quick—quick—oh, don't you hear him calling?—and they are driving him down to the lake—he will be in the water soon—and lost—lost—lost—Ronald!—Ronald!—"

Nay, by this time she had actually succeeded in raising the under sash of the window a few inches—notwithstanding that the nurse clung round her, and tried to hold her arms, while she uttered shriek after shriek to call attention; and there is no doubt that the girl, grown quite frantic, would have succeeded in opening the window and throwing herself out, had not Mrs. Lalor, alarmed by the shrieking of the nurse, rushed in. Between them they got her back into bed; and eventually she calmed down somewhat; for, indeed, this paroxysm had robbed her of all her remaining strength. She lay in a kind of stupor now; she paid no heed to anything that was said to her; only her eyes were restless—when any one entered the room.

Dr. Tilley was with her father; the younger man was apparently calm, though rather pale; Mr. Hodson made no effort to conceal his agony of anxiety.

"I can only tell you what is our opinion," the young Doctor said, speaking for himself and his brother practitioner. "We should be as pleased as you could be to have Dr. Macartney here; but the delay—well, the delay might prove dangerous. Her temperature is 107—you know what that means?"

"But this rolling up in a wet sheet—there is a risk, isn't there?" the elder man said; and how keenly he was watching the expression of the young Doctor's face!

"I have only seen it used in extreme cases," was the answer. "If she were my own daughter, or sister, that is what I would do."

"You have a right to speak—you have already saved her life once," her father said.

"If we could only bring about a profuse perspiration," the young Doctor said, a little more eagerly—for he had been maintaining a professionally dispassionate manner; "and then if that should end in a long deep sleep—everything would go well then. But at present every hour that passes is against us—and her temperature showing no sign of abating."

"Very well," her father said, after a moment's involuntary hesitation. "If you say the decision rests with me, I will decide. We will not wait for Macartney. Do what you propose to do—I know you think it is for the best."

And so it proved. Not once, but twice, within a space of seven days, had this young Doctor saved Carry Hodson's life. That evening they were all seated at dinner in the big dining-hall—Mrs. Lalor and her sister, Jack Huysen, and Carry's father—though the food before them did not seem to concern them much. They were talking amongst themselves, but rather absently and disconnectedly; and, what was strange enough, they spoke in rather low tones, as if that were of any avail. Dr. Tilley came in, and walked quickly up to the table; and quite unwittingly he put his hand on Emma Kerfoot's shoulder.

"I have good news," said he, and there was a kind of subdued triumph in his eyes. "She is sleeping as soundly—as soundly as any human being ever slept—everything has come off well—why, I am as happy as if I had been declared President!" But instantly he perceived that this exuberance of triumph was not in accordance with professional gravity. "I think there is every reason to be satisfied with the prospect," he continued in more measured tones, "and now that Dr. Sargent is with her, and the night nurse just come down, I think I will take the opportunity to get something to eat—for I have forgotten about that since breakfast."

"Oh, Tom!" cried Miss Kerfoot reproachfully; and presently everybody at the table was showering attentions on this young man.

"And may I go in and see her now?" said Miss Kerfoot, preparing to steal away.

"No," was the peremptory answer. "No one. Every half hour of a sleep like that is worth its weight in gold—

well, that's a muddle, but you know what I mean. It's worth a cart-load of gold, anyway. I hope she'll go on for twenty-four hours, or thirty-six, for the matter of that. Oh, I can tell you it is quite refreshing to look at her—talk about the sleep of an infant!—you never saw an infant sleeping as deep and sound as that; and I shouldn't wonder now if her temperature were down another degree by midnight."

But he saw that Mr. Hodson was still terribly agitated.

"Well, sir, would you like to go in and see her for a moment? I have told the nurse to leave the door half an inch open, and there's a screen to keep off the draught; I dare say we can slip in without disturbing her."

And so it was that Mr. Hodson saw his daughter again—not with flushed cheeks and dilated eye, but lying still and calm, a very weight of sleep appearing to rest on her eyelids. And when he came out of the room again, he pressed the young man's hand—it was a message of thanks too deep for words.

All that night she slept; and all next day she slept, without a moment's intermission. When, at length, she opened her eyes, and stirred a little, Emma Kerfoot was by the bedside in an instant.

"Dear Carry!" she said. "Do you want anything?"

She shook her head slightly; she was excessively weak; but the look in her eyes was one of calm intelligence; it was clear that the delirium had left her.

"Do you know that your father is here?"

"Why?" she managed to say.

"Because you have been so ill! Don't you know? Don't you recollect?"

"Yes—I know, a little," she said. "Where is Jack Huysen?"

"He is here in the hotel too. Oh, how glad they will all be to hear that you are quite yourself again. And I must go and tell them, as soon as nurse comes; for, you know, you'll have a long pull before you, Carry; and if you don't get quite well again not one of us will ever forgive ourselves for bringing you to Lake George. And there's Jack Huysen, poor fellow, he has just been distracted; and all the time you were ill you never had a word for him—though he used to haunt the passage outside just like a ghost—well, well, you'll have to make it up to him."

At this moment the nurse appeared, and Miss Kerfoot was free to depart on her joyful errand. Of course, she was for summoning everybody—and Jack Huysen among the rest; but the doctors interposed; their patient must be kept perfectly quiet; in the meantime no one but her father was to have access to her room.

Now Mr. Hodson, when he was seated there by her side, and chatting lightly and carelessly about a variety of indifferent matters (she herself being forbidden to speak), considered that he could not do better than relieve her mind of any anxiety she may have entertained on Ronald's account. All through her delirium that was the one thing that seemed to trouble her; and, lest she should revert to it, he thought he might as well give her ample assurance that Ronald should be looked after. However, to his great surprise, he found that she was quite ignorant of her having made these appeals on behalf of Ronald. She did not seem to know that she had been in dire distress about him, reproaching herself for their treatment of him, and begging her father to make such atonement as was yet possible. No; when she was allowed to speak a little, she said quite calmly that it was a pity they had not been able to go to Scotland that autumn; that they should have written to Ronald to see how he was getting on; and that her father, if he visited the old country, in the coming spring, ought surely to seek him out, and remind him that he had some friends in America who would be glad to hear of his welfare. But Mr. Hodson said to himself that he would do a little more than that. He was not going to recall the promise that he had made to his daughter when, as he thought, she lay near to the very gates of death. What had put that pathetic solicitude into her mind he knew not; but she had made her appeal, with dumb fever-stricken eyes and trembling voice; and he had answered her and pledged his word. Ronald should be none the loser that this sick girl had thought of him when that she seemed to be vanishing away from them for ever; surely in that direction, as well as any other, the father might fitly give his thank-offering—for the restitution to life of the sole daughter of his house?

CHAPTER XLV.

IN ABSENCE.

LOCH NAVER lay calm and still under the slow awakening of the dawn. All along the eastern horizon the low-lying hills were of a velvet-textured olive-green—a mysterious shadow-land where no detail was visible; but overhead the skies were turning to a clear and luminous gray; the roseate tinge was leaving the upper slopes of Ben Loyal and Ben Clebrig; and the glassy surface of the lake was gradually whitening as the red-golden light changed to silver and broadened up and through the wide sleeping world. An intense silence lay over the little hamlet among the trees; not even a dog was stirring; but a tiny column of pale blue smoke issuing from one of the chimneys told that some one was awake within—probably the yellow-haired Nelly, whose duties began at an early hour.

And what was Meenie—or Rose Meenie, or Love Meenie, as she might be called now, after having all those things written about her—what was she doing awake and up at such a time? At all events, her morning greeting was there confronting her. She had brought it and put it on the little dressing-table; and as she brushed out her beautiful abundant brown tresses, her eyes went back again and again to the pencilled lines, and she seemed not ill-pleased. For this was what she read:

The hinds are feeding upon the hill,
And the hares on the fallow lea;
Awake, awake, Love Meenie!
Birds are singing in every tree;

And roses you'll find on your window-sill
To scent the morning air;
Awake, awake, Love Meenie,
For the world is shining fair!

O who is the mistress of bird and flower?
Ben Clebrig knows, I ween!
Awake, awake, Love Meenie,
To show them their mistress and queen!

And it could hardly be expected that she should bring any very keen critical scrutiny to bear on these careless verses of

Ronald's (of which she had now obtained a goodly number, by dint of wheedling and entreaty, and even downright insistence), seeing that nearly all of them were written in her praise and honour; but even apart from that she had convinced herself that they were very fine indeed; and that one or two of them were really pathetic; and she was not without the hope that, when the serious affairs of life had been attended to, and a little leisure and contemplation become possible, Ronald might turn to his poetical labours again and win some little bit of a name for himself amongst a few sympathetic souls here and there. That he could do so, if he chose, she was sure enough. It was all very well for him to make light of these scraps and fragments; and to threaten to destroy them if she revealed the fact of their existence to anybody; but she knew their worth, if he did not; and when, in this or that magazine or review, she saw a piece of poetry mentioned with praise, her first impulse was to quickly read it in order to ask herself whether Ronald—given time and opportunity—could not have done as well. Moreover, the answer to that question was invariably the same; and it did not leave her unhappy. It is true (for she would be entirely dispassionate) he had not written anything quite so fine as "Christabel"—as yet; but the years were before him; she had confidence; the world should see—and give him a fitting welcome all in good time.

When, on this clear morning, she was fully equipped for her walk, she stole silently down the stair, and made her way out into the now awakening day. The little hamlet was showing signs of life. A stable-lad was trying to get hold of a horse that had strayed into the meadow; a collie was barking its excitement over this performance; the pretty Nelly appeared carrying an armful of clothes to be hung out to dry. And then, as Meenie passed the inn, she was joined by Harry the terrier, who, after the first grovelling demonstrations of joy, seemed to take it for granted that he was to be allowed to accompany her. And she was nothing loth. The fact was, she was setting out in quest of that distant eyrie of Ronald's of which he had often told her; and she doubted very much whether she would be able to find it; and she considered that perhaps

the little terrier might help her. Would he not naturally make for his master's accustomed resting-place, when they were sufficiently high up on the far Clebrig slopes?

So they went away along the road together; and she was talking to her companion; and telling him a good deal more about Glasgow, and about his master, than probably he could understand. Considering, indeed, that this young lady had just been sent home in deep disgrace, she seemed in excellent spirits. She had borne the parting admonitions and upbraidings of her sister Agatha with a most astonishing indifference; she had received her mother's reproaches with a placid equanimity that the little woman could not understand at all (only that Meenie's face once or twice grew fixed and proud when there was some scornful reference to Ronald); and she had forthwith set about nursing her father—who had caught a severe chill and was in bed—with an amiable assiduity, just as if nothing had happened. As regards her father, he either did not know, or had refused to know, about Meenie's lamentable conduct. On this one point he was hopelessly perverse; he never would listen to anything said against this daughter of his; Meenie was always in the right—no matter what it was. And so, notwithstanding that she had been sent home as one in disgrace, and had been received as one in disgrace, she installed herself as her father's nurse with an amazing self-content; and she brought him his beef-tea and port-wine at the stated intervals (for the good Doctor did not seem to have as much faith in drugs as might have been anticipated); and she kept the peat-fire piled up and blazing; and she methodically read to him the *Inverness Courier*, the *Glasgow Weekly Citizen*, and the *Edinburgh Scotsman;* and when these were done she would get out a volume of old ballads, or perhaps "The Eve of St. Agnes," or "Esmond," or "As You Like It," or the "Winter's Tale." It did not matter much to him what she read; he liked to hear the sound of Meenie's voice—in this hushed, half-slumberous, warm little room, while the chill north winds howled without, chasing each other across the driven loch, and sighing and sobbing away along the lonely Strath-Terry.

But on this fair morning there was not a breath stirring; and the curving bays and promontories and birch-woods,

and the far hills beyond, were all reflected in the magic mirror of the lake, as she sped along the highway, making for the Clebrig slopes. And soon she was mounting these —with the light step of one trained to the heather; and ever as she got higher and higher the vast panorama around her grew wider and more wide, until she could see hills and lochs and wooded islands that never were visible from Inver-Mudal. In the perfect silence, the sudden whirr of a startled grouse made her heart jump. A hare—that looked remarkably like a cat, for there was as much white as bluish-brown about it—got up almost at her feet and sped swiftly away over heath and rock until it disappeared in one of the numerous peat-hags. There was a solitary eagle slowly circling in the blue; but at so great a height that it was but a speck. At one moment she thought she had caught sight of the antlers of a stag; and for a second she stopped short, rather frightened; but presently she had convinced herself that these were but two bits of withered birch, appearing over the edge of a rock far above her. It was a little chillier here; but the brisk exercise kept her warm. And still she toiled on and on; until she knew, or guessed, that she was high enough; and now the question was to discover the whereabouts of the clump of rocks under shelter of which Ronald was accustomed to sit, when he had been up here alone, dreaming day-dreams, and scribbling the foolish rhymes that had won to her favour, whatever he might think of them.

At first this seemed a hopeless task; for the whole place was a wilderness of moss and heather and peat-hags, with scarcely a distinctive feature anywhere. But she wandered about, watching the little terrier covertly; and at last she saw him put his nose in an inquiring way into a hole underneath some tumbled boulders. He turned and looked at her; she followed. And now there could be no doubt that this was Ronald's halting-place and pulpit of meditation; for she forthwith discovered the hidden case at the back of the little cave—though the key of that now belonged to his successor. And so, in much content, she sate herself down on the heather; with all the wide, sunlit, still world mapped out before her—the silver thread of Mudal Water visible here and there among the moors, and Loch Meadie with

its islands, and Ben Hope and Ben Loyal, and Bonnie Strath-Naver, and the far Kyle of Tongue close to the northern Sea.

Now, what had Love Meenie climbed all this height for? what but to read herself back into the time when Ronald used to come here alone; and to think of what he had been thinking; and to picture herself as still an unconscious maiden wandering about that distant little hamlet that seemed but two or three dots down there among the trees. This, or something like it, has always been a favourite pastime with lovers; but Meenie had an additional source of interest in the possession of a packet of those idle rhymes, and these were a kind of key to bygone moods and days. And so it was here—in this strange stillness—that Ronald had written these verses about her; and perhaps caught a glimpse of her, with his telescope, as she came out from the cottage to intercept the mail; when little indeed was she dreaming that he had any such fancies in his head. And now as she turned over page after page, sometimes she laughed a little, when she came to something that seemed a trifle audacious—and she scarcely wondered that he had been afraid of her seeing such bold declarations: and then again a kind of compunction filled her heart; and she wished that Ronald had not praised her so; for what had she done to deserve it; and how would her coming life be made to correspond with these all too generous and exalted estimates of her character? Of course she liked well enough to come upon praises of her abundant brown hair, and her Highland eyes, and the rose-leaf tint of her cheeks, and the lightness of her step; for she was aware of these things as well as he; and glad enough that she possessed them, for had they not commended her to him? But as for these other wonderful graces of mind and disposition with which he had adorned her? She was sadly afraid that he would find her stupid, ill-instructed, unread, fractious, unreasonable, incapable of understanding him. Look, for example, how he could imbue these hills and moors and vales with a kind of magic, so that they seemed to become his personal friends. To her they were all dead things (except Mudal Water, at times, on the summer evenings), but to him they seemed

instinct with life. They spoke to him; and he to them; he understood them; they were his companions and friends; who but himself could tell of what this very hill of Clebrig was thinking?—

Ben Clebrig's a blaze of splendour
In the first red flush of the morn,
And his gaze is fixed on the eastward
To greet the day new-born;
And he listens a-still for the bellow
Of the antlered stag afar,
And he laughs at the royal challenge,
The hoarse, harsh challenge of war.

But Ben Clebrig is gentle and placid
When the sun sinks into the west,
And a mild and a mellow radiance
Shines on his giant crest;
For he's looking down upon Meenie
As she wanders along the road,
And the mountain bestows his blessing
On the fairest child of God.

There again: what could he see in her (she asked herself) that he should write of her so? He had declared to her that the magic with which all this neighbourhood was imbued was due to her presence there; but how could she, knowing herself as she did, believe that? And how to show her gratitude to him; and her faith in him; and her confidence as to the future? Well, she could but give to him her life and the love that was the life of her life—if these were worth the taking.

But there was one among these many pieces that she had pondered over which she returned to again and again, and with a kind of pride; and that not because it sounded her praises, but because it assured her hopes. As for Ronald's material success in life, she was troubled with little doubt about that. It might be a long time before he could come to claim his wife; but she was content to wait; in that direction she had no fears whatever. But there was something beyond that. She looked forward to the day when even the Stuarts of Glengask and Orosay should know what manner of man this was whom she had chosen for her husband. Her mother had called him an uneducated peasant; but she paid no heed to the taunt;

rather she was thinking of the time when Ronald—other things being settled—might perhaps go to Edinburgh, and get to know some one holding the position there that Jeffrey used to hold (her reading was a little old-fashioned) who would introduce him to the world of letters and open the way to fame. She knew nothing of Carry Hodson's luckless attempt in this direction; she knew, on the contrary, that Ronald was strongly averse from having any of these scraps printed; but she said to herself that the fitting time would come. And if these unpolished verses are found to belie her confident and proud prognostications as to the future, let it be remembered that she was hardly nineteen, that she was exceedingly warm-hearted, that she was a young wife, and day and night with little to think about but the perfections of her lover, and his kindness to her, and his praise of her, and the honour in which he held her. However, this piece was not about Meenie at all—he had called it

BY ISLAY'S SHORES.

By Islay's shores she sate and sang:
"O winds, come blowing o'er the sea,
And bring me back my love again
That went to fight in Germanie!"

And all the livelong day she sang,
And nursed the bairn upon her knee:
"Balou, balou, my bonnie bairn,
Thy father's far in Germanie,

But ere the summer days are gane,
And winter blackens bush and tree,
Thy father will we welcome hame
Frae the red wars in Germanie."

O dark the night fell, dark and mirk;
A wraith stood by her icily:
"Dear wife, I'll never more win hame,
For I am slain in Germanie.

On Minden's field I'm lying stark,
And Heaven is now my far countrie,
Farewell, dear wife, farewell, farewell,
I'll ne'er win hame frae Germanie."

And all the year she came and went,
And wandered wild frae sea to sea;
"O neighbours, is he ne'er come back,
My love that went to Germanie?"

Port Ellen saw her many a time;
Round by Port Askaig wandered she:
"Where is the ship that's sailing in
With my dear love frae Germanie?"

But when the darkened winter fell:
"It's cold for baith my bairn and me;
Let me lie down and rest awhile:
My love's away frae Germanie.

O far away and away he dwells;
High Heaven is now his fair countrie;
And there he stands—with arms outstretched—
To welcome hame my bairn and me!"

And if Meenie's eyes were filled with tears when she had re-read the familiar lines, her heart was proud enough; and all her kinsmen of Glengask and Orosay had no terrors for her; and her mother's taunts no sting. Of course, all this that she hoped for was far away in the future; but even as regarded the immediate years before her she refused to be harassed by any doubt. Perhaps she would not have asserted in set terms that a knack of stringing verses together proved that the writer had also the capacity and knowledge and judgment necessary to drain and fence and plant and stock a Highland estate; abstract questions of the kind had little interest for her; what she did know—what formed the first article of her creed, and the last, and the intervening thirty-seven—was that Ronald could do anything he put his mind to. And this was a highly useful and comfortable belief, considering all her circumstances.

And so she sped away down the mountain-side again—glad to have discovered Ronald's retreat; and so light and swift was her step that when she at length reached the inn she found herself just ahead of the mail coming in from the south. Of course she waited for letters; and when Mrs. Murray had opened the bags, it was found there were three for the Doctor's cottage. The first was from Ronald; that Meenie whipped into her pocket. The second was for Mrs. Douglas, and clearly in Agatha's handwriting. The third, addressed to Meenie, had an American stamp on it; and this was the one that she opened and read as she quietly walked homeward.

It was a long letter; and it was from Miss Carry Hodson;

who first of all described the accident that had befallen her, and her subsequent illness; and plainly intimated that no such thing would have happened had her Highland friends been in charge of the boat. Then she went on to say that her father had just sailed for Europe; that he had business to transact in Scotland; that he wished to see Ronald; and would Miss Douglas be so very kind as to ask the innkeeper, or the post-master at Lairg, or any one who knew Ronald's address in Glasgow, to drop a post-card to her father, addressed to the Langham Hotel, London, with the information. Moreover, her father had intimated his intention of taking the Loch Naver salmon-fishing for the next season, if it was not as yet let; and in that case the writer would be overjoyed to find herself once more among her Inver-Mudal friends. Finally, and as a kind of reminder and keepsake, she had sent by her father a carriage-rug made mostly of chipmunk skins; and she would ask Miss Douglas's acceptance of it; and hoped that it would keep her knees snug and warm and comfortable when the winds were blowing too sharply along Strath-Terry.

Of course, all this was wonderful news to come to such a quiet and remote corner of the world; but there was other news as well; and that by an odd coincidence. Some little time after Mrs. Douglas had received the letter from Agatha, she came to Meenie.

"Williamina," said she, "Agatha writes to me about Mr. Frank Lauder."

"Yes?" said Meenie, rather coldly.

"He intends renting the salmon-fishing on the loch for the next season; and he will be alone at the inn. Agatha hopes that we shall be particularly civil to him; and I hope —I say, I hope—that every one in this house will be. It is of the greatest importance, considering how he stands with regard to Mr. Gemmill. I hope he will be received in this house with every attention and kindness."

And then the pompous little dame left. It was almost a challenge she had thrown down; and Meenie was at first a little bewildered. What then?—would this young man, for the six weeks or two months of his stay, be their constant visitor? He would sit in the little parlour, evening after evening; and how could she keep him from talking to

her, and how could she keep him from looking at her? And Ronald—her husband—would be far away; and alone, perhaps; and not allowed a word with her; whereas she would have to be civil and polite to this young man; and even if she held her eyes downcast, how could she help his regarding her face?

And then she suddenly bethought her of Miss Hodson's letter. What?—was Mr. Hodson after the fishing too? And ought not the last tenant to have the refusal? And should not the Duke's agent know? And why should she not write him a note—just in case no inquiry had been made? She had not much time to think about the matter; but she guessed quickly enough that, if an American millionaire and the son of a Glasgow merchant are after the same thing, and that thing purchasable, the American is likely to get it. And why should Ronald's wife be stared at and talked to by this young man—however harmless and amiable his intentions?

So she went swiftly to her own room and wrote as follows:—

"DEAR MR. CRAWFORD—I have just heard from Miss Hodson, whose father was here last spring, that he is on his way to Europe; and that he hopes to have the fishing again this year. I think I ought to let you know, just in case you should have any other application for the loch. I am sure Miss Hodson will be much disappointed if he does not get it. Yours sincerely,

"MEENIE S. DOUGLAS."

"There," said she, and there was a little smile of triumph about her mouth, "if that doesn't put a spoke in the wheel of Mr. Frank Lauder, poor fellow, I don't know what will."

"Spiteful little cat," her sister Agatha would have called her, had she known; but women's judgments of women are not as men's.

CHAPTER XLVI.

WANDERINGS IN THE WEST.

On a singularly clear and brilliant morning in February a large and heavy screw-steamer slowly crept out of the land-locked little harbour of Portree, and steadily made away for the north. For her the squally Ben Inivaig at the mouth of the channel had no terrors; indeed, what could any vessel fear on such a morning as this? When they got well out into Raasay Sound, it seemed as if the whole world had been changed into a pantomime-scene. The sky was calm and cloudless; the sea was as glass and of the most dazzling blue; and those masses of white that appeared on that perfect mirror were the reflections of the snow-powdered islands—Raasay, and Fladda, and South Rona—that gleamed and shone and sparkled there in the sun. Not often are the wide waters of the Minch so fair and calm in mid-winter; the more usual thing is northerly gales, with black seas thundering by into Loch Staffin and Kilmaluag Bay, or breaking into sheets and spouts of foam along the headlands of Aird Point and Ru Hunish. This was as a holiday trip, but for the sharp cold. The islands were white as a solan's wing—save along the shores; the sea was of a sapphire blue; and when they got up by Rona light behold the distant snow-crowned hills of Ross and Cromarty rose faint and spectral and wonderful into the pale and summer-like sky. The men sung "*Fhir a Bhata*" as they scoured the brass and scrubbed the decks; the passengers marched up and down, clapping their hands to keep them warm; and ever as the heavy steamer forged on its way, the world of blue sea and sky and snow-white hills opened out before them, until some declared at last that in the far north they could make out the Shiant Isles.

Now under shelter of the companion-way leading down into the saloon three men were standing, and two of them were engaged in an animated conversation. The third, who was Mr. Hodson, merely looked on and listened, a little amused, apparently. One of the others—a tall, heavy bearded, north-Highland-looking man—was Mr. Carmichael, a famous estate-agent in London, who had run two or three

commissions together as an excuse for this mid-winter trip. The third member of the group was Ronald, who was hammering away in his usual dogmatic fashion.

"Pedigree? The pride of having ancestors?" he was saying. "Why, there's not a man alive whose ancestry does not stretch as far back as any other man's ancestry. Take it any way ye like: if Adam was our grandfather, then we're all his grandchildren; or if we are descended from a jellyfish or a monkey, the line is of the same length for all of us—for dukes, and kings, and herd-laddies. The only difference is this, that some know the names of their forefathers, and some don't; and the presumption is that the man whose people have left no story behind them is come of a more moral, useful, sober, hard-working race than the man whose forbears were famous cut-throats in the middle ages, or dishonest lawyers, or king's favourites. It's plain John Smith that has made up the wealth of this country; and that has built her ships for her, and defended her, and put her where she is; and John Smith had his ancestors at Cressy and Agincourt as well as the rest—ay, and they had the bulk of the fighting to do, I'll be bound; but I think none the worse of him because he cannot tell you their names or plaster his walls with coats of arms. However, it's idle talking about a matter of sentiment, and that's the fact; and so, if you'll excuse me, I'll just go down into the cabin, and write a couple o' letters."

A minute or so after he had disappeared, Mr. Hodson (who looked miserably cold, to tell the truth, though he was wrapped from head to heel in voluminous furs) motioned his companion to come a few yards aside, so that they could talk without fear of being overheard.

"Now," said he, in his slow and distinct way, "now we are alone, I want you to tell me what you think of that young man."

"I don't like his politics," was the prompt and blunt answer.

"No more do I," said Mr. Hodson coolly. "But for another reason. You call him a Radical, I call him a Tory. But no matter—I don't mean about politics. Politics?—who but a fool bothers his head about politics—unless he can make money out of them? No, I mean something

more practical than that. Here have you and he been together these three days, talking about the one subject nearly all the time—I mean the management of these Highland estates, and the nature of the ground, and what should be done, and all that. Well, now, you are a man of great experience ; and I want you to tell me what you think of this young fellow. I want you to tell me honestly ; and it will be in strict confidence, I assure you. Now, has he got a good solid grip of the thing ? Does he know ? Does he catch on ? Is he safe ? Is he to be trusted ?——"

"Oh, there, there, there!" said the big estate-agent, interrupting through mere good-nature. "That's quite another thing—quite another thing. I've not a word to say against him there—no, quite the other way—a shrewd-headed, capable fellow he is, with a groundwork of practical knowledge that no man ever yet got out of books. As sharp-eyed a fellow as I have come across for many a day —didn't you see how he guessed at the weak points of that Mull place before ever he set foot ashore ? Quick at figures, too—oh yes, yes, a capable fellow I call him ; he has been posting himself up, I can see ; but it's where his practical knowledge comes in that he's of value. When it's a question of vineries, or something like that, then he goes by the book—that's useless."

Mr. Hodson listened in silence ; and his manner showed nothing.

"I have been thinking he would be a valuable man for me," the agent said presently.

"In your office ?" said Mr. Hodson, raising his eyes.

"Yes. And for this reason. You see, if he would only keep away from those d—d politics of his, he is a very good-natured fellow, and he has got an off-hand way with him that makes shepherds, and keepers, and people of that kind friendly ; the result is that he gets all the information that he wants—and that isn't always an easy thing to get. Now if I had a man like that in my office, whom I could send with a client thinking of purchasing an estate—to advise him—to get at the truth—and to be an intelligent and agreeable travelling-companion at the same time—that would be a useful thing."

"Say, now," continued Mr. Hodson (who was attending

mostly to his own meditations), "do you think, from what you've seen of this young man, that he has the knowledge and business-capacity to be overseer—factor, you call it, don't you?—of an estate—not a large estate, but perhaps about the size of the one we saw yesterday or this one we are going to now? Would he go the right way about it? Would he understand what had to be done—I mean, in improving the land, and getting the most out of it——"

Mr. Carmichael laughed.

"It's not a fair question," said he. "Your friend Strang and I are too much of one opinion—ay, on every point we're agreed—for many's the long talk we've had over the matter."

"I know—I know," Mr. Hodson said. "Though I was only half-listening; for when you got to feu-duties and public burdens and things of that kind I lost my reckoning. But you say that you and Strang are agreed as to the proper way of managing a Highland estate: very well: assuming your theories to be correct, is he capable of carrying them out?"

"I think so—I should say undoubtedly—I don't think I would myself hesitate about trusting him with such a place—that is, when I had made sufficient inquiries about his character, and get some money guarantee about his stewardship. But then, you see, Mr. Hodson, I'm afraid, if you were to let Strang go his own way in working up an estate, so as to get the most marketable value into it, you and he would have different opinions at the outset. I mean with such an estate as you would find over there," he added, indicating with his finger the long stretch of wild and mountainous country they were approaching. "On rough and hilly land like that, in nine cases out of ten, you may depend on it, it's foresting that pays."

"But that's settled," Mr. Hodson retorted rather sharply. "I have already told you, and Strang too, that if I buy a place up here I will not have a stag or a hind from end to end of it."

"Faith, they're things easy to get rid of," the other said good naturedly. "They'll not elbow you into the ditch if you meet them on the road."

"No; I have heard too much. Why, you yourself said

that the very name of American stank in the nostrils of the Highlanders."

"Can you wonder?" said Mr. Carmichael quietly: they had been talking the night before of certain notorious doings, on the part of an American lessee, which were provoking much newspaper comment at the time.

"Well, what I say is this—if I buy a place in the Highlands—and no one can compel me to buy it—it is merely a fancy I have had for two or three years back, and I can give it up if I choose—but what I say is, if I do buy a place in the Highlands, I will hold it on such conditions that I shall be able to bring my family to live on it, and that I shall be able to leave it to my boy without shame. I will not associate myself with a system that has wrought such cruelty and tyranny. No; I will not allow a single acre to be forested."

"There's such a quantity of the land good for nothing but deer," Mr. Carmichael said, almost plaintively. "If you only saw it!—you're going now by what the newspaper writers say—people who never were near a deer-forest in their lives."

"Good for nothing but deer? But what about the black cattle that Ronald—that Strang—is always talking about?" was the retort—and Mr. Hodson showed a very unusual vehemence, or, at least, impatience. "Well, I don't care. That has got nothing to do with me. But it has got to do with my factor, or overseer, or whatever he is. And between him and me this is how it will lie: 'If you can't work my estate, big or small as it may be, without putting the main part of it under deer, and beginning to filch grazings here and there, and driving the crofters down to the sea-shore, and preventing a harmless traveller from having a Sunday walk over the hills, then out you go. You may be fit for some other place: not for mine.'" Then he went on in a milder strain. "And Strang knows that very well. No doubt, if I were to put him in a position of trust like that, he might be ambitious to give a good account of his stewardship; I think, very likely he would be, for he's a young man; but if I buy a place in the Highlands, it will have to be managed as I wish it to be managed. When I said that I wanted the most made out of the land, I did

not mean the most money. No. I should be glad to have four per cent for my investment; if I can't have that, I should be content with three; but it is not as a commercial speculation that I shall go into the affair, if I go into it at all. My wants are simple enough. As I tell you, I admire the beautiful, wild country; I like the people—what little I have seen of them; and if I can get a picturesque bit of territory somewhere along this western coast, I should like to give my family a kind of foothold in Europe, and I dare say my boy might be glad to spend his autumns here, and have a turn at the grouse. But for the most part of the time the place would be under control of the factor; and I want a factor who will work the estate under certain specified conditions. First, no foresting. Then I would have the crofts revalued—as fairly as might be; no crofter to be liable to removal who paid his rent. The sheep-farms would go by their market value, though I would not willingly disturb any tenant; however, in that case, I should be inclined to try Strang's plan of having those black cattle on my own account. I would have the cottars taken away from the crofts (allowing for the rent paid to the crofter, for that would be but fair, when the value of the crofts was settled), and I would build for them a model village, which you might look upon as a philanthropic fad of my own, to be paid for separately. No gratuitous grazing anywhere to crofter or cottar; that is but the parent of subsequent squabbles. Then I would have all the draining and planting and improving of the estate done by the local hands, so far as that was practicable. And then I should want four per cent return on the purchase-money; and I should not be much disappointed with three; and perhaps (though I would not admit this to anybody) if I saw the little community thriving and satisfied—and reckoning also the honour and glory of my being a king on my own small domain—I might even be content with two per cent. Now, Mr. Carmichael, is this practicable? And is this young fellow the man to undertake it? I would make it worth his while. I should not like to say anything about payment by results or percentage on profits; that might tempt him to screw it out of the poorer people when he was left master—though he does not talk like that kind of a fellow. I

wrote to Lord Ailine about him; and got the best of characters. I went and saw the old man who is coaching him for that forestry examination; he is quite confident about the result—not that I care much about that myself. What do you say now? You ought to be able to judge."

Mr. Carmichael hesitated.

"If you got the estate at a fair price," he said at length, "it might be practicable, though these improvement schemes suck in money as a sponge sucks in water. And as for this young fellow—well, I should think he would be just the man for the place—active, energetic, shrewd-headed, and a pretty good hand at managing folk, as I should guess. But, you know, before giving any one an important post like that—and especially with your going back to America for the best part of every year—I think you ought to have some sort of money guarantee as a kind of safeguard. It's usual. God forbid I should suggest anything against the lad—he's as honest looking as my own two boys, and I can say no more than that—still, business is business. A couple of securities, now, of £500 apiece, might be sufficient."

"It's usual?" repeated Mr. Hodson absently. "Yes, I suppose it is. Pretty hard on a young fellow, though, if he can't find the sureties. A thousand pounds is a big figure for one in his position. He has told me about his father and his brother: they're not in it, anyhow—both of them with hardly a sixpence to spare. However, it's no use talking about it until we see whether this place here is satisfactory; and even then don't say a word about it to him; for if some such post were to be offered to him—and if the securities were all right and so forth—it has got to be given to him as a little present from an American young lady, if you can call it a present when you merely propose to pay a man a fair day's wage for a fair day's work. And I am less hopeful now; the three places we have looked at were clearly out of the question; and my Highland mansion may prove to be a castle in Spain after all."

Late that night they reached their destination; and early next morning at the door of the hotel—which looked

strangely deserted amid the wintry landscape—a waggonette was waiting for them, and also the agent for the estate they were going to inspect. They started almost directly; and a long and desperately cold drive it proved to be; Mr. Hodson, for one, was glad enough when they dismounted at the keeper's cottage where their tramp over the ground was to begin—he did not care how rough the country might be, so long as he could keep moving briskly.

Now it had been very clear during these past few days that Ronald had not the slightest suspicion that Mr. Hodson, in contemplating the purchase of a Highland estate (which was an old project of his), had also in his eye some scheme for Ronald's own advancement. All the way through he had been endeavouring to spy out the nakedness of the land, and to demonstrate its shortcomings. He considered that was his business. Mr. Hodson had engaged him—at what he considered the munificent terms of a guinea a day and all expenses paid—to come and give his advice; and he deemed it his duty to find out everything, especially whatever was detrimental, about such places as they visited, so that there should be no swindling bargain. And so on this Ross-shire estate of Balnavrain, he was proving himself a hard critic. This was hopelessly bleak; that was worthless bog-land;—why was there no fencing along those cliffs?—where were the roads for the peats?—who had had control over the burning of the heather?—wasn't it strange that all along these tops they had not put up more than a couple of coveys of grouse, a hare or two, and a single ptarmigan? But all at once, when they had toiled across this unpromising and hilly wilderness, they came upon a scene of the most startling beauty—for now they were looking down and out on the western sea, that was a motionless mirror of blue and white; and near them was a wall of picturesquely wooded cliffs; and below that again, and sloping to the shore, a series of natural plateaus and carefully planted enclosures; while stretching away inland was a fertile valley, with smart farmhouses, and snug clumps of trees, and a meandering river that had salmon obviously written on every square foot of its partially frozen surface.

"What a situation for a house!" was Ronald's in-

voluntary exclamation—as he looked down on the sheltered semicircle below him, guarded on the east and north by the cliffs, and facing the shining west.

"I thought ye would say that," the agent said, with a quiet smile. "It's many's the time I've heard Sir James say he would give £20,000 if he could bring the Castle there; and he was aye minded to build there—ay, even to the day of his death, poor man; but then the Colonel, when the place came to him, said no; he would rather sell Balnavrain; and maist likely the purchaser would be for building a house to his ain mind."

"And a most sensible notion too," Mr. Hodson said. "But look here, my friend: you've brought us up to a kind of Pisgah; I would rather go down into that land of Gilead, and see what the farmhouses are like."

"Ay, but I brought ye here because it's about the best place for giving ye an idea of the marches," said the man imperturbably, for he knew his own business better than the stranger. "Do ye see the burn away over there beyond the farmhouse?"

"Yes, yes."

"Well, that's the Balnavrain march right up to the top; and then the Duchess runs all along the sky-line yonder—to the black scaur."

"You don't say!" observed Mr. Hodson. "I never heard of a Duchess doing anything so extraordinary."

"But we march with the Duchess," said the other, a little bewildered.

"That's a little more decorous, anyway. Well now, I suppose we can make all that out on the Ordnance Survey map when we get back to the hotel. I'm for getting down into the valley—to have a look around; I take it that if I lived here I shouldn't spend all the time on a mountain-top."

Well, the long and the short of it was that, after having had two or three hours of laborious and diligent tramping and inspection and questioning and explanation, and after having been entertained with a comfortable meal of oat-cake and hot broth and boiled beef at a hospitable farm-house, they set out again on their cold drive back to the hotel, where a long business conversation went on all the

evening, during dinner and after dinner. It was very curious how each of these three brought this or that objection to the place—as if bound to do so; and how the fascination of the mere site of it had so clearly captivated them none the less. Of course, nothing conclusive was said or done that night; but, despite these deprecatory pleas, there was a kind of tacit and general admission that Balnavrain, with proper supervision and attention to the possibilities offered by its different altitudes, might be made into a very admirable little estate, with a dwelling-house on it second in point of situation to none on the whole western sea-board of the Highlands.

"Ronald," said Mr. Hodson that evening, when Mr. Carmichael had gone off to bed (he was making for the south early in the morning), "we have had some hard days' work; why should we let Loch Naver lie idle? I suppose we could drive from here somehow? Let us start off to-morrow; and we'll have a week's salmon-fishing."

"To Inver-Mudal?" he said—and he turned quite pale.

"Yes, yes, why not?" Mr. Hodson answered. But he had noticed that strange look that had come across the younger man's face; and he attributed it to a wrong cause. "Oh, it will not take up so much of your time," he continued. "Mr. Weems declares you must have your certificate as a matter of course. And as for expenses—the present arrangement must go on naturally until you get back to Glasgow. What is a week, man? Indeed, I will take no denial."

And Ronald could not answer. To Inver-Mudal?—to meet the girl whom he dared not acknowledge to be his wife?—and with his future as hopelessly uncertain as ever. Once or twice he was almost driven to make a confession to this stranger, who seemed so frankly interested in him and his affairs; but no; he could not do that; and he went to bed wondering with what strange look in her eyes Meenie would find him in Inver-Mudal—if he found it impossible to resist the temptation of being once more within sight of her, and within hearing of the sound of her voice.

CHAPTER XLVII.

A PLEDGE REDEEMED.

Mr. Hodson could by no means get to understand the half-expressed reluctance, the trepidation almost, with which Ronald seemed to regard this visit to Inver-Mudal. It was not a matter of time; for his studies for the examination were practically over. It was not a matter of expense; for he was being paid a guinea a day. It was not debt; on that point Mr. Hodson had satisfied himself by a few plain questions; and he knew to a sovereign what sum Ronald had still in the bank. Nor could he believe, after the quite unusual terms in which Lord Ailine had written about the young man's conduct and character, that Ronald was likely to have done anything to cause him to fear a meeting with his former friends. And so, having some little experience of the world, he guessed that there was probably a girl in the case; and discreetly held his peace.

But little indeed was he prepared for the revelation that was soon to be made. On the afternoon of one of these cold February days they were driving northward along Strath-Terry. A sprinkling of snow had fallen in the morning; the horses' hoofs and the wheels of the waggonette made scarcely any sound in this prevailing silence. They had come in sight of Loch Naver; and the long sheet of water looked quite black amid the white undulations of the woods and the moorland and the low-lying hills. Now at this point the road leading down to the village makes a sudden turn; and they were just cutting round the corner when Ronald, who had been anxiously looking forward, caught sight of that that most he longed and that most he feared to see. It was Meenie herself—she was walking by the side of the way, carrying some little parcel in her hand; and they had come upon her quite unexpectedly, and noiselessly besides; and what might she not betray in this moment of sudden alarm? He gripped the driver's arm, thinking he might stop the horses; but it was now too late for that. They were close to her; she heard the patter of horses' hoofs; she looked up, startled; and the next moment—when she saw Ronald there—she

had uttered a quick, sharp cry, and had staggered back a step or so, until in her fright she caught at the wire fence behind her. She did not fall; but her face was as white as the snow around her; and when he leapt from the waggonette, and seized her by both wrists, so as to hold her there, she could only say, "Ronald, Ronald," and could seek for no explanation of this strange arrival. But he held her tight and firm; and with a wave of his hand he bade the driver drive on and leave them. And Mr. Hodson lowered his eyes, thinking that he had seen enough; but he formally raised his hat, all the same; and as he was being driven on to the inn, he returned to his surmise that there was a girl in the case—only who could have imagined that it was the Doctor's daughter?

Nor was there a single word said about this tell-tale meeting when Ronald came along to the inn, some few minutes thereafter. He seemed a little preoccupied, that was all. He rather avoided the stormy welcome that greeted him everywhere; and appeared to be wholly bent on getting the preparations pushed forward for the fishing of the next day. Of course everything had to be arranged; for they had had no thought of coming to Inver-Mudal when they sailed from Glasgow; there was not even a boat on the loch, nor a single gillie engaged.

But later on that evening, when the short winter day had departed, and the blackness of night lay over the land, Ronald stole away from the inn, and went stealthily down through the fields till he found himself by the side of the river. Of course, there was nothing visible; had he not known every foot of the ground, he dared not have come this way; but onward he went like a ghost through the dark until he finally gained the bridge, and there he paused and listened. "Meenie!" he said, in a kind of whisper; but there was no reply. And so he groped his way to the stone dyke by the side of the road, and sate down there, and waited.

This was not how he had looked forward to meeting Meenie again. Many a time he had pictured that to himself—his getting back to Inver-Mudal after the long separation—the secret summons—and Meenie coming silently out from the little cottage to join him. But always the

night was a moonlight night; and the wide heavens calm and clear; and Loch Naver rippling in silver under the dusky shadows of Ben Clebrig. Why, he had already written out that summons; and he had sent it to Meenie; and no doubt she had read it over to herself more than once; and wondered when the happy time was to be. The night that he had looked forward to was more like a night for a lovers' meeting: this was the message he had sent her—

O white's the moon upon the loch,
And black the bushes on the brae,
And red the light in your window-pane:
When will ye come away,
Meenie,
When will ye come away?

I'll wrap ye round and keep ye warm,
For mony a secret we've to tell.
And ne'er a sound will hinder us
Down in yon hidden dell,
Meenie,
Down in yon hidden dell.

O see the moon is sailing on
Through fleecy clouds across the skies,
But fairer far the light that I know,
The love-light in your eyes,
Meenie,
The love-light in your eyes.

O haste and haste; the night is sweet,
But sweeter far what I would hear;
And I have a secret to tell you,
A whisper in your ear,
Meenie,
A whisper in your ear.

But here was a bitter cold winter night; and Meenie would have to come through the snow; and dark as pitch it was—he would have to guess at the love-light in her eyes, so cruelly dense was this blackness all around.

Then his quick ear detected a faint sound in the distance—a hushed footfall on the snow; and that came nearer and nearer; he went out to the middle of the road.

"Is that you, Meenie?"

The answer was a whisper—

"Ronald!"

And like a ghost she came to him through the dark; but indeed this was no ghost at all that he caught to him and that clung to him, for if her cheeks were cold her breath was warm about his face, and her lips were warm, and her ungloved hands that were round his neck were warm, and all the furry wrappings that she wore could not quite conceal the joyful beating of her heart.

"Oh, Ronald—Ronald—you nearly killed me with the fright—I thought something dreadful had happened—that you had come back without any warning—and now you say instead that it's good news—oh, let it be good news, Ronald—let it be good news—if you only knew how I have been thinking and thinking—and crying sometimes—through the long days and the long nights—let it be good news that you have brought with you, Ronald!"

"Well, lass" (but this was said after some little time; for he had other things to say to her with which we have no concern here), "it may be good news; but it's pretty much guess-work; and maybe I'm building up something on my own conceit, that will have a sudden fall, and serve me right. And then even at the best I hardly see——"

"But, Ronald, you said it was good news!" And then she altered her tone. "Ah, but I don't care! I don't care at all when you are here. It is only when you are away that my heart is like lead all the long day; and at night I lie and think that everything is against us—and such a long time to wait—and perhaps my people finding out—but what is it, Ronald, you had to tell me?"

"Well, now, Meenie," said he.

"But that is not my name—to you," said she; for indeed she scarce knew what she said, and was all trembling, and excited, and clinging to him—there, in the dark, mid the wild waste of the snow.

"Love-Meenie and Rose-Meenie, all in one," said he, "listen, and I'll tell you now what maybe lies before us. Maybe, it is, and that only; I think this unexpected coming to see you may have put me off my head a bit; but if it's all a mistake—well, we are no worse off than we were before. And this is what it is now: do you remember my telling you that Mr. Hodson had often been talking of

buying an estate in the Highlands?—well, he has just been looking at one—it's over there on the Ross-shire coast—and it's that has brought us to the Highlands just now, for he would have me come and look at it along with him. And what would you think if he made me the factor of it? Well, maybe I'm daft to think of such a thing; but he has been talking and talking in a way I cannot understand unless some plan of that kind is in his head; ay, and he has been making inquiries about me, as I hear; and not making much of the forestry certificate, as to whether I get it or no; but rather, as I should guess, thinking about putting me on this Balnavrain place as soon as it becomes his own. Ay, ay, sweetheart; that would be a fine thing for me, to be in a position just like that of Mr. Crawford—though on a small scale; and who could prevent my coming to claim my good wife then, and declaring her as mine before all the world?"

"Yes, yes, Ronald," she said eagerly, "but why do you talk like that? Why do you speak as if there was trouble? Surely he will make you factor! It was he that asked you to go away to Glasgow; he always was your friend; if he buys the estate, who else could he get to manage it as well?"

"But there's another thing, sweetheart," said he, rather hopelessly. "He spoke about it yesterday. Indeed, he put it plain enough. He asked me fairly whether, supposing somebody was to offer me the management of an estate, I could get guarantees—securities for my honesty, in fact; and he even mentioned the sum that would be needed. Well, well, it's beyond me, my girl—where could I find two people to stand surety for me at £500 apiece?"

She uttered a little cry, and clung closer to him.

"Ronald—Ronald—surely you will not miss such a chance for that—it is a matter of form, isn't it?—and some one——"

"But who do I know that has got £500, and that I could ask?" said he. "Ay, and two of them. Maybe Lord Ailine might be one—he was always a good friend to me—but two of them—two of them—well, well, good lass, if it has all got to go, we must wait for some other chance."

"Yes," said Meenie bitterly, "and this American—he calls himself a friend of yours too—and he wants guarantees for your honesty!"

"It's the usual thing, as he said himself," Ronald said. "But don't be downhearted, my dear. Hopes and disappointments come to every one, and we must meet them like the rest. The world has always something for us—even these few minutes—with your cheeks grown warm again—and the scent of your hair—ay, and your heart as gentle as ever."

But she was crying a little.

"Ronald—surely—it is not possible this chance should be so near us—and then to be taken away. And can't I do something? I know the Glengask people will be angry—but—but I would write to Lady Stuart—or if I could only go to her, that would be better—it would be between woman and woman, and surely she would not refuse when she knew how we were placed—and—and it would be something for me to do—for you know you've married a pauper bride, Ronald—and I bring you nothing—when even a farmer's daughter would have her store of napery and a chest of drawers and all that—but couldn't I do this, Ronald?—I would go and see Lady Stuart—she could not refuse me!"

He laughed lightly; and his hands were clasped round the soft brown hair.

"No, no, no, sweetheart; things will have come to a pretty pass before I would have you exposed to any humiliation of that sort. And why should you be downhearted? The world is young for both of us. Oh, don't you be afraid; a man that can use his ten fingers and is willing to work will tumble into something sooner or later; and what is the use of being lovers if we are not to have our constancy tried? No, no; you keep a brave heart; if this chance has to be given up, we'll fall in with another; and maybe it will be all the more welcome that we have had to wait a little while for it."

"A little while, Ronald?" said she.

He strove to cheer her and reassure her still further; although, indeed, there was not much time for that; for he had been commanded to dine with Mr. Hodson at half-

past seven; and he knew better than to keep the man who might possibly be his master waiting for dinner. And presently Meenie and he were going quietly along the snow-hushed road; and he bade her good-bye—many and many times repeated—near the little garden-gate; and then made his way back to the inn. He had just time to brush his hair and smarten himself up a bit when the pretty Nelly—who seemed to be a little more friendly and indulgent towards him than in former days—came to say that she had taken the soup into the parlour, and that the gentleman was waiting.

Now Mr. Hodson was an astute person; and he suspected something, and was anxious to know more; but he was not so ill-advised as to begin with direct questions. For one thing, there was still a great deal to be talked over about the Balnavrain estate—which he had almost decided on purchasing; and, amongst other matters, Ronald was asked whether the overseer of such a place would consider £400 a year a sufficient salary, if a plainly and comfortably built house were thrown in; and also whether, in ordinary circumstances, there would be any difficulty about a young fellow obtaining two sureties to be responsible for him. From that it was a long way round to the Doctor's daughter; but Mr. Hodson arrived there in time; for he had brought for her a present from his own daughter; and he seemed inclined to talk in a friendly way about the young lady. And at last he got the whole story. Once started, Ronald spoke frankly enough. He confessed to his day-dreams about one so far superior to him in station; he described his going away to Glasgow; his loneliness and despair there; his falling among evil companions and his drinking; the message of the white heather; his pulling himself up; and Meenie's sudden resolve and heroic self-surrender. The private marriage, too—yes, he heard the whole story from beginning to end; and the more he heard the more his mind was busy; though he was a quiet kind of person, and the recital did not seem to move him in any way whatever.

And yet it may be doubted whether, in all the county of Sutherland, or in all the realm of England, there was any happier man that night than Mr. Josiah Hodson. For here was something entirely after his own heart. His pet

hobby was playing the part of a small beneficent Providence; and he had already befriended Ronald, and was greatly interested in him; moreover, had he not promised his daughter, when she lay apparently very near to death, that Ronald should be looked after? But surely he had never looked forward to any such opportunity as this! And then the girl was so pretty—that, also, was something. His heart warmed to the occasion; dinner being over, they drew their chairs towards the big fireplace where the peats were blazing cheerfully; Ronald was bidden to light his pipe; and then the American—in a quiet, indifferent, sententious way, as if he were talking of some quite abstract and unimportant matter—made his proposal.

"Well, now, Ronald," said he, as he stirred up some of the peats with his foot, "you seemed to think that £400 a year and a house thrown in was good enough for the overseer of that Balnavrain place. I don't know what your intentions are; but if you like to take that situation, it's yours."

Ronald looked startled—but only for a moment.

"I thank ye, sir; I thank ye," he said, with rather a downcast face. "I will not say I had no suspicion ye were thinking of some such kindness; and I thank ye—most heartily I thank ye. But it's beyond me. I could not get the securities."

"Well, now, as to that," the American said, after a moment's consideration, "I am willing to take one security—I mean for the whole amount; and I want to name the person myself. If Miss Douglas will go bail for you—or Mrs. Strang, I suppose I should call her—then there is no more to be said. Ronald, my good fellow, if the place is worth your while, take it; it's yours."

A kind of flash of joy and gratitude leapt to the younger man's eyes; but all he could manage to say was—

"If I could only tell *her!*"

"Well, now, as to that again," said Mr. Hodson, rising slowly, and standing with his back to the fire, "I have got to take along that present from my daughter—to-morrow morning would be best; and I could give her the information, if you wished. But I'll tell you what would be still better, my friend: you just let me settle this little affair with the old people—with the mamma, as I understand.

I'm not much of a talkist; but if you give me permission I'll have a try; I think we might come to some kind of a reasonable understanding, if she doesn't flatten me with her swell relations. Why, yes, I think I can talk sense to her. I don't want to see the girl kept in that position; your Scotch ways—well, we haven't got any old ballads in my country, and we like to have our marriages fair and square and aboveboard: now let me tell the old lady the whole story, and try to make it up with her. She can't scold my head off."

And by this time he was walking up and down the room; and he continued—

"No; I shall go round to-morrow afternoon, when we come back from the fishing. And look here, Ronald; this is what I want you to do; you must get the other boat down to the lake—and you will go in that one—and get another lad or two—I will pay them anything they want. I can't have my overseer acting as gillie, don't you see—if I am going to talk with his mother-in-law; you must get out the other boat; and if you catch a salmon or two, just you send them along to the Doctor, with your compliments—do you hear, your compliments, not mine. Now——"

"And I have not a word of thanks!" Ronald exclaimed. "My head is just bewildered——"

"Say, now," the American continued quietly—in fact, he seemed to be considering his finger-nails more than anything else, as he walked up and down the room—"say, now, what do you think the Doctor's income amounts to in the year? Not much? Two hundred pounds with all expenses paid?"

"I really don't know," Ronald said—not understanding the drift of this question.

"Not three hundred, anyway?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"Ah. Well, now, I've got to talk to that old lady to-morrow about the prospects of her son-in-law—though she don't know she has got one," Mr. Hodson was saying—half to himself, as it were. "I suppose she'll jump on me when I begin. But there's one thing. If I can't convince her with four hundred a year, I'll try her with five—and Carry shall kiss me the difference."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE FACTOR OF BALNAVRAIN.

WELL, now, some couple of months or so thereafter, this same Miss Carry was one of a party of four—all Americans—who set out from Lairg station to drive to Inver-Mudal; and very comfortable and content with each other they seemed to be when they were ensconced in the big waggonette. For a convalescent, indeed, Miss Hodson appeared to be in excellent spirits; but there may have been reasons for that; for she had recently become engaged; and her betrothed, to mark that joyful circumstance, had left for Europe with her; and it was his first trip to English shores; and more especially it was his first trip to the Highlands of Scotland; and very proud was she of her self-imposed office of chaperon and expounder and guide. Truth to tell, the long and lank editor found that in many respects he had fallen upon troublous times; for not only was he expected to be profoundly interested in historical matters about which he did not care a red cent, and to accept any and every inconvenience and discomfort as if it were a special blessing from on high, and to be ready at all moments to admire mountains and glens and lakes when he would much rather have been talking of something more personal to Miss Carry and himself, but also—and this was the cruellest wrong of all—he had to listen to continued praises of Ronald Strang that now and again sounded suspiciously like taunts. And on such occasions he was puzzled by the very audacity of her eyes. She regarded him boldly—as if to challenge him to say that she did not mean every word she uttered; and he dared not quarrel with her, or dispute; though sometimes he had his own opinion as to whether those pretty soft dark eyes were quite so innocent and simple and straightforward as they pretended to be.

"Ah," said she, as they were now driving away from the village into the wide, wild moorland, "ah, when you see Ronald, you will see a man."

She had her eyes fixed on him.

"I suppose they don't grow that kind of a thing in our country," he answered meekly

"I mean," she said with a touch of pride, "I mean a man who is not ashamed to be courteous to women—a man who knows how to show proper respect to women."

"Why, yes, I'll allow you won't find that quality in an American," he said, with a subtle sarcasm that escaped her, for she was too obviously bent on mischief.

"And about the apology, now?"

"What apology?"

"For your having published an insulting article about Ronald, to be sure. Of course you will have to apologise to him, before this very day is over."

"I will do anything else you like," the long editor said, with much complaisance. "I will fall in love with the young bride, if you like. Or I'll tell lies about the weight of the salmon when I get back home. But an apology? Seems to me a man making an apology looks about as foolish as a woman throwing a stone: I don't see my way to that. Besides, where does the need of it come in, anyhow? You never read the article. It was very complimentary, as I think; yes, it was so; a whole column and more about a Scotch gamekeeper——"

"A Scotch gamekeeper!" Miss Carry said proudly. "Well, now, just you listen to me. Ronald knows nothing at all about this article; if he did, he would only laugh at it; but he never heard of it; and it's not to be spoken of here. But I mean to speak of it, by and by. I mean to speak of it, when I make the acquaintance of—what's his distinguished name?——"

But here Miss Kerfoot—who, with her married sister, occupied the other side of the waggonette—broke in.

"You two quarrelling again!" And then she sighed. "But what is the good of a drive, anyway, when we haven't got Doctor Tom and his banjo?"

"A banjo—in Strath-Terry?" Miss Carry cried. "Do you mean to say you would like to hear a banjo tinkle-tinkling in a country like this?"

"Yes, my dyaw," said Miss Kerfoot coolly: she had been making some studies in English pronunciation, and was getting on pretty well.

"I suppose you can't imagine how Adam passed the time without one in the Garden of Eden—wanted to play

to Eve on the moonlight nights—a cake-walk, I suppose—pumpkin-pie—why, I wonder what's the use of bringing you to Europe."

For answer Miss Kerfoot began to hum to herself—but with the words sounding clearly enough—

"I'se gwine back to Dixie,
I'se gwine back to Dixie,
I'se gwine where the orange blossoms grow;
O, I'd rather be in Dixie,
I'd rather be in Dixie,
For travelling in the Highlands is so———"

But here remorse of conscience smote her; and she seized Carry's hand.

"No, I won't say it—you poor, weak, invalid thing. And were they worrying you about the Highlands, and the slow trains, and the stuffy omnibus at Lairg? Well, they shan't say anything more to you—that they shan't; and you are to have everything your own way; and I'm going to fall in love with Ronald, just to keep you company."

But alas! when they did eventually get to Inver-Mudal, there was no Ronald to be found there. Mr. Murray was there, and Mrs. Murray, and the yellow-haired Nelly; and the travellers were told that luncheon was awaiting them; and also that Mr. Hodson had had the second boat put in readiness, lest any of them should care to try the fishing in the afternoon.

"But where is Ronald?" said Miss Carry, not in the least concealing her vexation.

"Don't cry, poor thing," Miss Kerfoot whispered to her. "It shall have its Ronald!"

"Oh, don't bother!" she said angrily. "Mr. Murray, where is Ronald? Is he with my father on the loch?"

"No, no; it's the two gillies that's with Mr. Hodson on the loch," the innkeeper said. "And do not you know, Miss, that Ronald is not here at ahl now; he is away at the place in Ross-shire."

"Oh yes, I know that well enough," she said, "but my father wrote that he was coming over to see us for a day or two; and he was to be here this morning—and his wife as well. But it is of no consequence. I suppose we had better go in and have lunch now."

Miss Kerfoot was covertly laughing. But there was a young lad there called Johnnie—a shy lad he was, and he was standing apart from the others, and thus it was that he could see along the road leading down to the Mudal bridge. Something in that direction attracted Johnnie's attention; he came over and said a word or two to Mr. Murray; the innkeeper went to the gable of the house, so that he could get a look up Tongue way, and then he said—

"Oh yes, I think that will be Ronald."

"Don't you hear?" said Miss Kerfoot, who was following the others into the inn. "They say that Ronald is coming right now."

Miss Carry turned at once, and went to where the innkeeper was standing. Away long there, and just coming over the bridge, was a dog-cart, with two figures in it. She watched it. By and by it was pulled up in front of the Doctor's cottage; she guessed that that was Meenie who got down from the vehicle and went into the house: no doubt this was Ronald who was now bringing the dog-cart along to the inn. And then the others were summoned; and presently Ronald had arrived and was being introduced to them; and Miss Carry had forgotten all her impatience, for he looked just as handsome and good-natured and modest-eyed as ever; and it was very clear that Miss Kerfoot was much impressed with the frankness and simplicity of his manner; and the editor strove to be particularly civil; and Mrs. Lalor regarded the new-comer with an obviously approving glance. For they all had heard the story; and they were interested in him, and in his young wife; besides they did not wish to wound the feelings of this poor invalid creature—and they knew what she thought of Ronald.

And how was he to answer all at once these hundred questions about the Ross-shire place, and the house that was building for them, and the farm where he and his wife were temporarily staying?

"Come in and have lunch with us, Ronald," said Miss Carry, in her usual frank way, "and then you will tell us all about it. We were just going in; and it's on the table."

"I cannot do that very well, I thank ye," said he, "for I

have to go back to the Doctor's as soon as I have seen the mare looked after——"

"Oh, but I thought you were coming down to the loch with us!" she said, with very evident disappointment.

"Yes, yes, to be sure!" said he. "I'll be back in a quarter of an hour at the furthest; and then I'll take one of the lads with me and we'll have the other boat got out as well."

"But you don't understand, Ronald," she said quickly. "The other boat is there—ready—and two gillies, and rods, and everything. I only want you to come with us for luck; there's always good luck when you are in the boat. Ah, do you know what they did to me on Lake George?"

"Indeed, I was sorry to hear of it, Miss," said he gravely.

"Miss!" she repeated, with a kind of reproach; but she could not keep the others waiting any longer; and so there was an appointment made that they were all to meet at the loch side in half an hour; and she and her friends went into the house.

When it came to setting out, however, Mrs. Lalor begged to be excused; she was a little bit tired, she said, and would go and lie down. So the other three went by themselves; and when they got down to the loch, they not only found that Ronald was there awaiting them, but also that Mr. Hodson had reeled up his lines and come ashore to welcome them. Of course that was the sole reason. At the same time the gillies had got out three remarkably handsome salmon and put them on the grass; and that was the display that met the eyes of the strangers when they drew near. Mr. Hodson was not proud; but he admitted that they were good-looking fish. Yes; it was a fair morning's work. But there were plenty more where these came from, he said encouragingly; they'd better begin.

Whereupon Miss Carry said promptly—

"Come along, Em. Mr. Huysen, will you go with pappa, when he is ready?" And Ronald will come with us, to give us good luck at the start."

Miss Kerfoot said nothing, but did as she was bid; she merely cast a glance at Mr. Huysen as they were leaving; and her eyes were demure.

However, if she considered this manœuvre—as doubtless

she did—a piece of mere wilful and perverse coquetry on the part of her friend, she was entirely mistaken, It simply never would have entered Miss Carry's head that Ronald should have gone into any other person's boat, so long as she was there—nor would it have entered his head either. But besides that, she had brought something for him; and she wished to have time to show it to him; and so, when the boat was well away from the shore, and when he had put out both the lines, she asked him to be so kind as to undo the long case lying there, and to put the rod together, and say what he thought of it. It was a salmon-rod, she explained; of American make; she had heard they were considered rather superior articles; and if he approved of this one, she begged that he would keep it.

He looked up with a little surprise.

"Ye are just too kind," said he. "There's that beautiful rug that you sent to my wife, now——"

"But isn't it useful?" she said, in her quick, frank way. "Isn't it comfortable? When you were coming along this morning, didn't she find it comfortable?"

"Bless me!" he cried. "Do you think she would put a beautiful thing like that into a dog-cart to be splashed with mud, and soiled with one's boots? No, no; it's put over an easy-chair at the Doctor's until we get a house of our own, and proud she is of it, as she ought to be."

And proud was he, too, of this beautiful rod—if he declared that it was far too fine for this coarse trolling work; and Miss Kerfoot arrived at the impression that if he could not make pretty speeches of thanks, there was that in his manner that showed he was not ungrateful.

Nor was Miss Carry's faith in Ronald's good luck belied; for they had not been more than twenty minutes out on the loch when they had got hold of something; and at once she rose superior to the excitement of the gillies, and to the consternation of her American friend. Perhaps she was showing off a little; at all events, she seemed quite cool and collected, as if this strain on the rod and the occasional long scream of the reel were a usual kind of thing; and Ronald looked on in quiet composure, believing that his pupil was best left alone. But alas! alas! for that long illness. The fish was a heavy one

and a game fighter; Miss Carry's arms were weaker than she had thought; at the end of about a quarter of an hour—during which time the salmon had been plunging and boring and springing, and making long rushes in every conceivable manner—she began to feel the strain. But she was a brave lass; as long as ever she could stand upright, she held on; then she said, rather faintly—

"Ronald!"

"Take the rod," she said, "The fish isn't played out; but I am."

"What's the matter?" said he, in great alarm, as she sank on to the seat.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," she said, though she was a little pale. "Give Em the rod—give Miss Kerfoot the rod—quick, Em, get up and land your first salmon."

"Oh my gracious no; I should die of fright!" was the immediate answer.

But Ronald had no intention of allowing Miss Carry's salmon to be handed over to any one else. He turned to the gillies.

"Is there not a drop of whisky in the boat? Quick, lads, if you have such a thing—quick, quick!—"

They handed him a small green bottle; but she shrank from it.

"The taste is too horrid for anything," she said. "But I will have another try. Stand by me, Ronald; and mind I don't fall overboard."

She got hold of the rod again; he held her right arm—but only to steady her.

"Carry—Carry!" her friend said anxiously. "I wish you'd leave it alone. Remember, you've been ill—it's too much for you—oh, I wish the thing would go away!"

"I mean to wave the banner over this beast, if I die for it," Miss Carry said, under her breath; and Ronald laughed—for that was more of his way of thinking.

"We'll have him, sure enough," he said. "Ay, and a fine fish, too, that I know."

"Oh, Ronald!" she cried.

For there was a sudden and helpless slackening of the line. But she had experience enough to reel up hard; *and* presently it appeared that the salmon was there—very

much there, in fact, for now it began to go through some performances—within five-and-twenty yards of the boat—that nearly frightened Miss Kerfoot out of her wits. And then these cantrips moderately slowed down; the line was got in shorter; Ronald, still steadying Miss Carry's right arm with his left hand, got hold of the clip in the other; and the young lady who was the spectator of all this manœuvring began rather to draw away in fear, as that large white gleaming thing showed nearer and nearer the coble. Nay, she uttered a quick cry of alarm when a sudden dive of the steel hook brought out of the water a huge silvery creature that the next moment was in the bottom of the boat; and then she found that Carry had sunk down beside her, pretty well exhausted, but immensely proud; and that the gillies were laughing and vociferous and excited over the capture; and Ronald calmly getting out his scale-weight from his pocket. The other boat was just then passing.

"A good one?" Mr. Hodson called out.

"Just over sixteen pounds, sir."

"Well done. But leave us one or two; don't take them all."

Miss Carry paid no heed. She was far too much exhausted; but pleased and satisfied, also, that she had been able to see this fight to the end. And she remembered enough of the customs of the country to ask the two gillies to take a dram—though it had to come from their own bottle; she said she would see that that was replenished when they got back to the inn.

It was a beautiful clear evening as they all of them—the fishing having been given up for the day—walked away through the meadows, and up into the road, and so on to the little hamlet; the western sky was shining in silver-gray and lemon and saffron; and there was a soft sweet feeling almost as of summer in the air, though the year was yet young. They had got six fish all told; that is to say, Mr. Hodson's boat had got one more in the afternoon; while Miss Carry had managed to pick up a small thing of eight pounds or so just as they were leaving off. The fact was, they did not care to prosecute the fishing till the last moment; for there was to be a little kind of a dinner-

celebration that evening; and no doubt some of them wanted to make themselves as smart as possible—though the possibilities, as a rule, don't go very far in the case of a fishing-party in a Highland inn—all to pay due honour to the bride.

And surely if ever Meenie could lay claim to the title of Rose-Meenie it was on this evening when she came among these stranger folk—who were aware of her story, if not a word was said or hinted of it—and found all the women be-petting her. And Mrs. Douglas was there, radiant in silk and ribbons, if somewhat austere in manner; and the big good-natured Doctor was there, full to overflowing with jests and quips and occult Scotch stories; and Mr. and Mrs. Murray had done their very best for the decoration of the dining-room—though Sutherlandshire in April is far from being Florida. And perhaps, too, Miss Carry was a little paid out when she saw the perfectly servile adulation which Mr. J. C. Huysen (who had a sensitive heart, according to the young men of the *N. Y. Sun*) laid at the feet of the pretty young bride; though Mr. Hodson rather interfered with that, claiming Mrs. Strang as his own. Of course, Miss Kerfoot was rather downhearted, because of the absence of her Tom and his banjo; but Ronald had promised her she should kill a salmon on the morrow; and that comforted her a little. Mrs. Lalor had recovered, and was chiefly an amused spectator; there was a good deal of human nature about; and she had eyes.

Altogether it was a pleasant enough evening; for, although the Americans and the Scotch are the two nations out of all the world that are the most madly given to after-dinner speech-making, nothing of the kind was attempted: Mr. Hodson merely raised his glass and gave "The Bride!" and Ronald said a few manly and sensible words in reply. Even Mrs. Douglas so far forgot the majesty of Glengask and Orosay as to become quite complaisant; perhaps she reflected that it was, after all, chiefly through the kindness of these people that her daughter and her daughter's husband had been placed in a comfortable and assured position.

Ronald and Meenie had scarcely had time as yet to cease from being lovers; and so it was that on this same

night he presented her with two or three more of those rhymes that sometimes he still wrote about her when the fancy seized him. In fact, he had written these verses as he sate on the deck of the big screw-steamer, when she was slowly steaming up the Raasay Sound.

O what's the sweetest thing there is
In all the wide, wide world?—
A rose that hides its deepest scent
In the petals closely curled?

Or the honey that's in the clover;
Or the lark's song in the morn;
Or the wind that blows in summer
Across the fields of corn;

Or the dew that the queen of the fairies
From her acorn-chalice sips?
Ah no; for sweeter and sweeter far
Is a kiss from Meenie's lips!

And Meenie was pleased—perhaps, indeed, she said as much and showed as much, when nobody was by; but all the same she hid away the little fragment among a mass of similar secret treasures she possessed; for she was a young wife now; and fully conscious of the responsibilities of her position; and well was she aware that it would never do for any one to imagine that nonsense of that kind was allowed to interfere with the important public duties of the factor of Balnavrain.

THE END.

LONDON:
PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED,
STAMFORD STREET AND CHARING CROSS.

The following is a complete list of the new Half-Crown Edition of Mr. Black's *Novels, and the probable order of their monthly issue beginning January* 1892.

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NEW YORK: HARPER AND BROTHERS, FRANKLIN SQUARE.